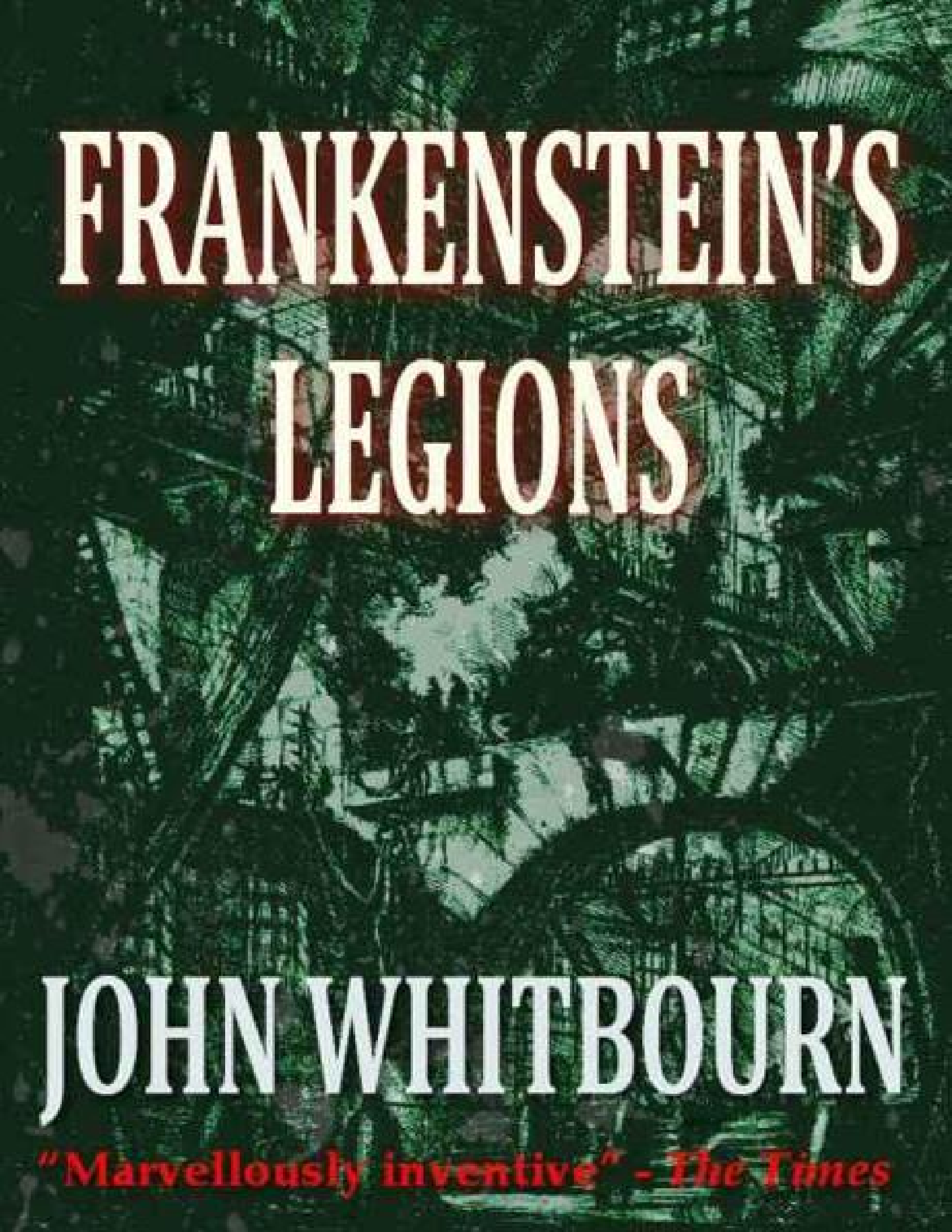
FRANKENSTEIN'S
LEGIONS
JOHN WHITBOURN
"Marvellously inventive" - The Times

Annotation

Baron Frankenstein fashioned just one creature from the remnants of the dead, but the Governments who have hijacked his discoveries see the advantage of resurrection on an industrial scale. What better way to fight their never-ending wars than with armies of obedient undead soldiers, recycled from earlier battles? And how better to silence their own citizens who protest at ceaseless conflict and plundered graveyards?

Set in the 1830s, Frankenstein's Legions details an alternative history in which Frankensteinian science is a reality, revived after patchy prohibition by a second and even more fanatical French Revolution. The republican regime, inspired by zeal and desperation, has swept over Europe, employing inexhaustible swarms of zombie-like (or Lazaroid) troops. The remaining independent nations, including England, are obliged to shed their scruples and likewise raise Lazaroid armies.

Across this crazed and Gothic history stride Julius Frankenstein, soldier nephew of the notorious scientist; Charles Babbage inventor of the proto-computer Difference Engine; and the Honourable Augusta Ada, Countess of Lovelace, genius daughter of Lord Byron. Pulling their strings – they believe – are the puppetmasters Talleyrand, French statesman par excellence and now a renegade in English employ; and Sir Percy Blakeney, sometime Scarlet Pimpernel and current head of the British Secret Service.

Meanwhile, the French have been unwise enough to revive their recently deceased Emperor. The intention was simply to pick the brain of history's foremost military mind. However, the risen Emperor Napoleon is developing fresh ambitions of his own…

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‘Even if they [his creations] were to leave Europe, and inhabit the deserts of the new world, yet one of the first results of those sympathies for which the dæmon thirsted would be children, and a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth who might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror.’

Thoughts of Victor Frankenstein, 1796

PART ONE: DEATH

ENGLAND EXPECTS!

TO ALL YOU JOLLY JACK TARS & STOUT FELLOWS OF OLDE ENGLAND! AN EXHORTATION & OPPORTUNITY.

WHEREAS ENGLAND HAS BRED YOU BOLD & STRONG, YOUR NATION DESERVES SERVICE IN RETURN.

OUR GRACIOUS SOVEREIGN REQUIRES MEN OF ALL DEGREES TO SERVE ABOARD HIS NAVY OF SO MANY GLORIOUS TRIUMPHS.

LIKEWISE, BRAVE LORD NELSON OF IMMORTAL MEMORY.

FRESH VICTORIES AWAIT!

SHALL THE CALL GO UNHEEDED? SHALL THE DASTARDLY FRENCH ACCOUNT OUR RACE AS COWARDS ? WHAT STORIES SHALL YOU RECOUNT IN AFTER-TIMES TO YOUR LITTLE ONES AND SWEETHEARTS? WHEN DEATH CALLS (AS IT MUST TO ALL IN DUE FRUITION) WHAT TALE WILL YOU TELL?

REPAIR TODAY TO HIS MAJESTY'S DOCKYARD, PORTSMOUTH WHERE BOLD LORD NELSON OFFERS GENEROUS TERMS & ADVENTURE TO:

ABLE & ORDINARY SEAMEN &
MERCHANT MARINERS &
WAISTERS & LANDSMEN &
TIME-SERVED MARINES & SOLDIERY &
WILLING APPRENTICE LADS &
OWNERS OF RECENTLY REVIVED UNDEAD.

ENGLAND EXPECTS THAT EVERY MAN—LIVING OR LAZARAN—WILL DO HIS DUTY.

GOD SAVE THE KING

Printed under Royal license and gracious permission by Thomas Pothecary, bookseller and stationer by appointment. Mincing Lane, London, the Year of our Lord 1835.

PROLOGUES (plural)

‘More wine!’ ordered Ada—but got death instead.

True, Foxglove, her butler, whom she expected to bring the wine, occasionally looked like death warmed up, especially after a night on the tiles or a boxing bout, but he was most definitely numbered amongst the living. Those who answered Ada’s call down the voice-tube couldn’t say as much.

In fact they couldn’t say much at all. Low grade Lazarans were the product of low grade serum which started the heart but would never fire up witty conversation.

They did bring wine though. A bottle of it with which they broke poor Ada’s head.

The bottle contained a fine vintage and when shattered against her skull released the ghost of a long lost Spanish summer. Likewise, the skull it shattered released a ghost of equally fine lineage: the descendent of soldiers and poets mixed with a heady dash of genius or madness.

Her many admirers said that Ada was a blue blood as well as ‘blue-stocking.’ Not so. The deep-dark wine proved a perfect colour match to Ada’s lifeblood as it ebbed away. Both pooled on the writing desk on which they killed her, too free-flowing to be soaked up by the piles of paperwork.

Ada’s calculations for Mr Babbage were quite spoiled.

*** * ***

Wine was Mr Babbage’s downfall too. A single glass (never more nor less) was his invariable habit before retiring for the night, but it had never made him sleep so sound before…

‘Oh dear,’ said the police constable who eventually shook him awake. ‘Oh dear. What a busy bed!’

Through a thick head and eyes prickled by broad daylight Mr Babbage perceived that his bed did indeed seem heavily laden, even more so than when dear Mrs Babbage was still alive. That was another mystery to add to this shockingly late rising and there being a policeman in his bedroom.

The constable enlightened him on the latter conundrum.

‘Your man-servant alerted us, sir. Shortly after delivering your morning tea and *Times*. And he begs me to inform you that he has quit your service to never return. Likewise all your staff when they saw.

‘Saw? Saw what?’

With curling lip the constable drew back the covers and thus resolved another puzzle. The mattress sagged because Mr Babbage had company.

Two oiled youths, one to either side, smiled invitingly—or as best those revived from death can. They signalled every sign of intimate acquaintance.

‘We—go—again?’ enquired one, in typically Lazaran flat tones. And reached out.

‘Errrgh!’ exclaimed Babbage, and tried to hurl himself from the bed.

‘Too late, sir, I’m afraid,’ said the constable, detaining him. ‘Likewise, I much regret I’m the unbribable variety of officer, so don’t try that malarkey, there’s a good gentleman.’

Babbage was half tangled in the sheets, half still embroiled in the Lazarans’ loathsome embraces. Prisoners of their programming, they called to him.

‘Come —back —to —bed —master…’

Babbage tried to bat them off with his night-cap.

‘I can explain everything, officer!’

But the policeman merely sighed and shook his world-weary head. And Babbage, being an honest man, saw his point.

‘No, you’re right,’ he conceded heavily. ‘I can’t…’

The arresting officer had the decency to look downcast as he took out notebook and pencil.

‘Sodomy’s a hanging offence as well you know, Mr Babbage. Sexual relations with Lazarans likewise. So we’ve really gone to town viz a viz capital crime, haven’t we, sir? But be of good cheer; maybe your—previous—good name—will get sentence commuted to the treadmill…’

There was nothing more to be said. Babbage’s mind was like the calculating devices he sought to construct. Even as he pondered the injustice of it all. Innocent as an angel of any wrongdoing and the victim of a wicked plot, his brain dispassionately processed the new data.

Farewell, house of thirty years and marital memories. Farewell, workshop wherein he’d laboured at machines to make miracles. Most

certainly farewell, reputation and government grants towards his project.

Obviously blueprints and prototypes were now out of the question for the foreseeable future, even assuming he didn't swing. However, perhaps mental computations might still be possible whilst turning a treadmill?

It was no idle question. History hung in the balance that morning in number 1 Dorset Street, Manchester Square, Westminster. The world's future depended on the answer.

Alone of those present, only Babbage could perceive that. He saw, with a clarity that banished personal considerations like shame and sorrow, precisely what lay at stake. On the one hand stood further same old same old. History at its customary snail's-pace. On the other a huge shovel load of coal stoked into the fireplace of human progress.

In short, was the Analytical Engine merely delayed or forever aborted?

When that question was resolved, then and only then, Babbage would turn his great intellect towards exactly who'd framed him. And why.

*** * ***

It wouldn't work out that way. Reality shoulders innocence aside. It has powers of veto over even clever plans laid by clever people.

Mr Babbage was a clever man (perhaps the very cleverest of his Age) but the police constable (who'd barely skimmed schooling) could have corrected him. The difference was that the constable had been around the seamier seams of life. So, in some specific cases, he knew better.

Like about penal conditions for instance. Like how hard-labour and the treadmill left no energy for thinking, let alone detective work. Neither during the long days or at day's end.

And when each of those of days had done with you there was no margin left for luxuries. No reserves. By the end of the first week Mr Babbage would be doing well to remember his name. One month in and his world would have shrunk down to his resultant double hernia. The treadmill had that focussing effect.

Sad to say therefore, this side of the grave, whoever had done Mr Babbage this ill-turn stood a good chance of escaping scott-free.

But this world is not an entirely cold place. When he was able (which was infrequent), the constable was a kind man. And so he kept his counsel

and left Babbage a little while longer in blissful ignorance.

* * *

Unlike Mr Babbage, Lady Ada Lovelace didn’t go quietly. She’d no idea that was the done and dignified thing when faced with the inevitable. Her parents were to blame.

Papa, a poet, had scandalised his age (and wife) and so Mama, fearful of feeding the bad blood, fiercely shielded young Ada from all philosophy and liberal arts. Her education being strictly scientific Ada grew to womanhood having never heard of stoicism or noble resignation.

Thus when the Lazaran assassins came into her study Ada fought back in a most unladylike way. A lighted candle thrust in the face saw one off, and bringing the curtains down, pelmet and all, draped two more in a velvet shroud. Meanwhile, Ada shrieked like a banshee and generally made a drama out of a crisis.

Wasted wails and vain tears. From Lord Lovelace to the humblest servant in Horsley Towers, all were fast asleep, as all good people should be in the early hours before a busy day. Even the peacocks in the grounds who might have added their screams to hers dreamt peacock dreams. In short, she was the only living soul about. Unnatural Ada had troubled the silent night with her scribblings once too often.

Finally, the whey-faced Lazarans caught her. One pinned Ada to her desk and another brained her repeatedly with a bottle.

While her spirit and the other assassins fled, the best looking Lazaran stripped off his clothing and awaited developments.

Chapter 1: THEY MARCH BY NIGHT

‘Twenty pound and not a farthing more. Don’t waste breath trying to budge me.’

‘You’re a thief!’ said the solicitor. It demeaned him, haggling in the street like this, a source of amusement to urchins and passers-by, but he knew Babbage’s yard and workshop held material worth ten times that, even at scrap value.

The scrap merchant looked down on the solicitor from a great height of commercial and moral advantage.

‘That’s rich coming from a land-pirate!’ he said. ‘Anyhow, I’m the only ‘thief’ interested in the deal. Take it or leave it.’

He spoke truth: word had got around and a sulphurous taint hung over 1 Dorset Street and all its appurtenances. Offers for the house and contents had been thin on the ground. What respectable family wished to buy an abode where it was a blessing the walls could not speak? ‘Crimes against Nature,’ and ‘Unspeakable necrophilic depravity,’ as the judge had termed them, hardly enhanced property prices

Early hopes for some perfumed confirmed-bachelor house-buyer to appear and save the day went unfulfilled (there was never one about when you needed one). Accordingly, winding up Mr Babbage’s affairs had been a tale of woe and robbery and waste.

The hagglers had to leap for their lives as a hackney cab ploughed through without so much as a ‘mind y’backs!’ or flick of the whip. Arrogant prole-aristocrats!

Then, adding insult to injury, in passing it splashed them with mud and probably worse. Yet the indignity seemed strangely appropriate in the circumstances.

‘Done,’ snapped the solicitor. ‘And I damned well have been!’

Beggars (or buggers) could not be choosers—which was an apt epithet. By the time the solicitor’s fees and reasonable expenses were deducted from the proceeds of sale Mr Babbage might find begging his sole career option once his prison term was done.

The scrap merchant spat into his palm and offered to shake on it. The solicitor shrinkingly brushed two fingers past that general direction.

In went the scrap merchants' street-arabs. Out in due course and in carts came metal components galore, off to be reused or recycled. A short while before they'd been Mr Babbage's 'Analytical Engine': his hope of immortality and the blessing of mankind with mechanical computers.

So that was the end of that for a century or so.

* * *

When the sun set, the columns set out. There was no law against daylight movement, but it was for the best.

The Heathrow Hecatomb: a brutal slab of jerry-built concrete, devoid of the slightest humanising touch. Not even a Royal coat of arms graced the gate, for no one on earth, from high to low, wished their name associated with it.

Happily, Nature's revenge for the blot on the landscape had a head start due to that careless construction. Rain selectively streaked those parts with excess sand in the mix and drove its fingers in. The Hecatomb's hard edges were already crumbling. Particles of it dissolved down to whiten the dying grass below.

Accordingly, Heathrow Hecatomb wasn't going to outlive the great Cathedrals it matched in size—but that hardly worried its begetters. It kept people out and other people (sort of) in, and that sufficed. Aesthetic considerations could go hang—and appropriately enough there were gibbets enough atop the place, gibbets so busy there was a queue for their services.

A moat had been started but never completed: the finished structure's appearance and contents were found to be deterrent enough. Now the demi-ditch was a dog's graveyard and rubbish-record of every successive inhabitant. Other than in the depth of winter it stunk to high Heaven and glowed yellow-green in the dark.

So, all in all, the Hecatomb was no adornment to Hounslow Heath! Coaches passing through on the Great West Road put on a burst of speed—or even extra speed.

Because even before the Hecatomb arrived, 'Heathrow' had an evil reputation: the haunt of highwaymen and sad wanderers. As the name suggested it was a waste with a road running through it. Few lingered there by night and fewer still with honourable intentions.

Come the Hecatomb in the Year of Our Lord 1823, things soon reverted to business as normal—only more so. The scattered natives (innkeepers and/or misanthropes) barred all doors as dusk fell and then stayed indoors till morning. Highwaymen they could deal with, but now there were stories about escapes…

Unofficial escapes, that is. The regulated kind occurred regularly, as they did this particular night. The Hecatomb's main doors cracked to spill yellow light onto the heath. There emerged scouts—bona fide human hussars in scarlet and gold—to check the coast was clear. They scattered all over the scene in the interests of thwarting spies and scandal.

Then redcoat infantry—living soldiery with torches blazing—trooped forth to line the first part of the route. It was a sad necessity. Newly Revived recruits sometimes chose their first breath of fresh air as the signal to mutiny, go mad or otherwise malfunction. Recycling body pits awaited them behind the Hecatomb.

Finally, to the tolling of a sombre bell, columns of new Lazarans emerged from the nest; those most complete and with best matched limbs to the fore. Conversely, the more shoddily made 'Shamblers' were placed at the back and shot if they could not keep up.

Fife and drum and flag parties proceeded each regiment, manfully trying to add vitality to what painfully lacked it—and to drown out the perpetual groaning.

The Lazarans' grey uniforms were the least of their differences to the living men shepherding them along. The latter's pale faces were just the result of lack of sunshine, the former's the lack of something much more profound.

Down the Great West Road the Legions of the Dead marched to war. From a high window in the Hecatomb their creator watched them go.

*** * ***

At Longford, not a mile off, they were intercepted by emissaries so senior they could stop the column in its tracks. The colonel of the regiment didn't like that: once you got new Lazarans going it was as well to keep them moving till they grew accustomed to military life.

Yet there was nothing he could do. The seals on the emissaries' orders left no room for wrangling. The bugle call for halt rang out and most of the Lazarans remembered its meaning.

It was a dangerous moment. The living escorts were ordered to 'stand ready.'

Meanwhile, the undead looked around and took in what little there was to see. God alone knew what their blank-palette minds thought, for their faces weren't designed for expression. That quality of serum was reserved for higher grade revivals.

There'd been one occasion—and mercifully only one—when a whole corps had gone berserk and brushed aside their convoy. Acting on herd instinct they'd headed for inhabited areas and it eventually took massed cannon to stop them reaching Hampstead. Army gossip said their commander had been demoted so low he was currently saluting civilians in Shetland.

Praise be, there was no repetition now. Those who'd forgotten the stop signal were clubbed back into line and the ranks redressed with whips. Meanwhile, the emissaries reviewed this guard of no honour.

They picked a few of the best from the front: sturdy near good-as-new revivals, plus some immature specimens from the rear. Ideal candidates to become Ada's Lovelace's murderers and Mr Babbage's bed-fellows. Then the silken strangers left with their selection and that was all the regiment ever knew of it.

The colonel wasn't favoured with names or explanations: not even a receipt. Old fashioned courtesy was just another casualty of the 'Forty Year War.' Government by dictat was something people gradually got used to: a subset of the purely temporary suspension of democracy.

It didn't really matter. What did matter now, save winning the War and getting through life still vaguely human? Besides, the colonel's command would have bigger gaps than this torn from it soon enough.

'March on!'

The colonel rode along the column, brandishing his sabre as encouragement —or something. He studied the Lazarans and they studied him.

'I don't know what effect they'll have on the enemy' he mused, 'but by God they frighten me…'

It required a brace of ‘examples’ to be made before the regiment complied but eventually the march resumed.

Half a dozen ‘men’ down even before they’d passed Longford. It didn’t bode well.

* * *

Unfulfilled omens. Day two’s tally revealed only a couple had slipped away, off to terrorise the English countryside before the Yeomanry or peasantry hunted them down. Not bad considering.

The only fly in the ointment was a tight schedule. The necessary wide berth of London had taken longer than expected, made sticky by blocked roads. Clouds of cattle and sheep, on their way to feed the War just as the regiment was, were easily dispersed, for animals naturally sensed Lazarans and scattered. The curses of military shepherds were nothing to worry about.

Protesting Christians were more of a trial however. At Runnymede they met demonstrators. When they wouldn’t listen to authority or reason, the colonel had to resort to condign measures.

Shooting Quakers he had no problem with. Canting po-faced types for the most part, though the ladies in their prim bonnets excited not only his charity. It was the Catholics the colonel disliked dispersing the rough way. His Aunt had been a Papist and they suffered enough under the Penal laws as it was.

Still, if people put up barricades—even token flimsy barricades—on the King’s highway, they couldn’t complain when His Majesty’s new recruits were sent in. Which was ironic, considering these were the very same creatures the protest was on behalf of. Shocking scenes ensued.

Why, the colonel wondered, did Lazarans want to rape people when, strictly speaking, there was no point? They were incapable of either pleasure or conceiving children. He sadly concluded it must be something innate in human (or ex-human) nature.

Living troops mopped up any resistance with bayonets and collected the bodies for recycling.

By Kingston the colonel concluded that only forced marches would get them to their ship on time. That meant moving by both day and night and

snatched sleep in the saddle for those who needed it. He posted cavalry ahead to warn the natives.

Fortunately, Surrey was mostly heath and sparsely settled once you got past the London sprawl. Very ‘light land’ as surveyors termed it. Local magistrates did a good job and sent word so that minor roads paralleling the main one were cleared. After that, they made good time without further incident.

Though the colonel never knew it, besides the North Downs, where the old ‘Pilgrims’ Way’ brushed the Portsmouth Road, a man ruling an Empire which spanned one third of the globe (though only he recognised his rule) watched them go by.

From a drawing room in Loseley House, a mansion requisitioned from its ancient but ‘unpatriotic’ family, the man trained a spy-glass on the regiment as it shambled through the—now his—hamlet of Littleton. And since no one could see him, he shuddered.

It was imperfect picture in every sense. The elegant mother-of-pearl opera-glasses were not designed for such long-seeing. They gave only a fuzzy image: which given the view was perhaps just as well.

Another thing neither parties knew was that it was from this very regiment the observer had drawn Ada’s assassins and Babbage’s boys. Again, ignorance of the connection was probably for the best and thus bliss.

The peasantry had been recalled from the fields and children from their play. Presently, they huddled behind barred cottage doors and gripped rustic weaponry. The local militia stood to arms hidden from sight behind a barn. No less frightened, the livestock had scented something and crowded against field boundaries as far away as possible. Yet the sun still shone bright, and wayside wild-flowers abounded. Together, their splendid normality almost overcame the affliction traversing Littleton’s narrow lane. Almost.

As the regiment passed his drive the man had his best view of the drab column, glimpsing details right down to paper-white flesh and dead eyes. Accordingly, the opera glasses were set aside.

‘How did things come to this?’ he reflected. ‘It really is appalling!

But that was mere emotion (high emotion by his standards) and therefore unworthy of him or any man. Plus nothing to do with anything. As he’d famously once said (and shocked his audience): ‘Thought is everything—but also leads nowhere.’

No, civilised minds should transcend first thoughts and come to cooler conclusions, thereby building their house on rock (as Scripture so wisely advised). What did he really think about the unnatural horror show parading before his very window? Or, broader still, about the world-as-it-was come to see him in all its glory?

Answer came easy, in the form of another of his infamous epithets, said long before but in a similar death-connected context: ‘It is worse than a crime; it is a mistake!’ Which said it all as far he was concerned.

That settled, the man then chided himself that any old world-class intellect could describe the world. That was the easy bit. The point (and problem) was how to change it.

More difficult still, how could just one individual—even an exceedingly clever individual (such as he)—amend things for the better?

And, of course, have monstrous fun at the same time?

*** * ***

It was a quite a trip for name checks. Another important personage happened to see the new-forged regiment too. They crossed paths with Admiral Nelson, (Lord Merton, Duke of Bronte, Knight-commander of Naples, etc. etc.) as boats ferried him in his capsule to HMS Victory and them to their troopship.

Nelson curled his lip at their wafting stench of serum mixed with decaying meat—though, strictly speaking, in no position to cast stones himself.

*** * ***

In Germania the regiment proved its worth.

A stubborn salient of churned mud and rubble still described on maps as ‘The Prince-Archbishopric of Dresden’ was holding up the French armies. Any breakthrough by them there might lead to the recapture of Berlin for the umpteenth time. Occasion, it was decided, for a rare Allied counter-attack.

Disposed against that were legions of Lazarans (though the Conventionary army more tactfully termed them ‘New-Citizens’), backed by massed French cannon in unassailable positions.

Unassailable, that is, to soldiers with a life to lose. A life which they valued. And families. And souls.

The colonel’s ‘413th regiment of Revived Foot’ had few such qualms. Or if they did, bayonets and barbed-whips overcame them. They rushed the French emplacements and blocked grapeshot with their second-hand bodies whilst live troops manoeuvred and won the battle elsewhere.

So it was worth all the grave-robbing and serum and upsetting Littleton and Nelson after all.

Afterwards, men from the ‘Charon brigades’ went and collected any identifiable bits in order that the glorious 413th might become the glorious 414th.

Accordingly, Berlin didn’t fall for a further fortnight.

Chapter 2: A DAY IN THE LIFE OF JULIUS FRANKENSTEIN

'…how pleased you would be to remark the improvement of our Ernest! He is sixteen, and full of activity and spirit. He is desirous to be a true Swiss, and to enter into foreign service… My uncle is not pleased with the idea of a military career in a distant country; but Ernest has never had your powers of application. He looks upon study as an odious fetter;—his time is spent in the open air, climbing the hills or rowing on the lake. I fear that he will become an idler, unless we yield the point, and permit him to enter on the profession he has selected.'

Letter from Elizabeth Lavenza to Victor Frankenstein

Geneva; March 18th 1793

'Admitted this day of our Lord and Salvation, 23rd March 1801 as sergeant first class, Herr Ernest Frankenstein, citizen of Geneva, aged 24. Widower. One dependent accompanying: son, infant, named Julius.

'Bears own arms. Previous service with the forces of Genoa, Knights of St John, Poland, the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and sundry others. Numerous citations and medals from same, cited in the appendix attached. References received from the Grand Master of Malta and Cardinal-Archbishop of Smyrna.'

Subsequently annotated, in French: 'Deceased—Battle of the Pontine Gate, Rome, during the last conquest.'

From the Vatican muster rolls of the Swiss Guard

stored in the Musée de la Victoire, Paris

*** * ***

The previously mentioned pale face at the Heathrow Hecatomb window kept a diary. The day before she came the diary entry read: ‘Same. Breakfast. Visitor, with menaces. Pretend researches. Drink. Bed.’

Which was essentially it. But to expand:

‘You are at risk of being a disappointment to us, Frankenstein. I tell you in all candour: it does not do to be a disappointment to us.’

The visitor, presumably another Secret Service man, leant back to let his words sink in.

Other senior staff enjoyed a cheroot and coffee after breakfast. It was some compensation for sitting behind steel mesh watching the new revivals relearn to eat. Increasingly however, Julius Frankenstein got hauled over the coals instead.

Yet there was flattery in this. Julius was fairly shooting up the scale of threatening interviews. Slanging matches with local management and ‘final written warnings’ were left far behind. Now there was this nameless man from nowhere, with all the assurance in the world and silky skills to match it.

‘A pity,’ Frankenstein replied. ‘I have significant aptitude in that specialist field. I was a disappointment to my father as he was to his, as I am now to you. It is a family trait polished from generation to generation. However, if my presence is not required…’

The visitor steepled his fingers.

‘I am not a child to be humoured, Herr Frankenstein…’

Indeed not. The visitor was in his seventies if he was a day, though the legacies of a lusty youth still hung around. Particularly in the eyes. As for Julius, he was less afflicted with years but equally steeped in experience.

‘You must know that this is not a post one resigns from,’ the visitor continued. ‘Your current status is a curious one: both a bucket of blessings and the sword of Damocles hang over your head. It is in my power to decide which one falls.’

‘But not in mine to influence the decision.’

The visitor pursed his lips. Julius decided he must have been a fop in earlier days, a dandy about town but with a steely core. Only now the silk and lace contained a withered frame and the man of the world had expanded round the equator.

‘Au contraire, dear sir, au contraire. As the Heathrow Hecatomb’s Head of Research you are very much master of your own destiny. Which you would find out if only we saw some research from you. As it is, at best we get only grade three and four Lazarans from your laboratory: Revivals I wouldn’t trust to make tea. Or look after my library…’

Frankenstein guessed that tea took priority over books in this man’s life by a factor of five at least. The chill between them grew accordingly.

The visitor sensed it, even if he did not understand. He frowned.

‘You must understand, sir, that such mediocrity can be matched by myriad English technicians. Trustworthy technicians. Whereas you possess neither of those admirable qualities…’

Julius Frankenstein looked round the little interview room. It was bare of consolation. Yet he knew full well that if he directed his gaze within it would only meet a similarly bleak vista.

It was open to him to say he’d not asked for the post but had it thrust upon him. But then the visitor would counter he had asked for asylum in England—and got it, which not many did nowadays—and a job besides. A good job, vital to the War effort and his new adopted nation. It was cold and harsh out in the big wide world at the best of times (which this was most certainly not) and he should be grateful for his generous reception. Other nations, even his motherland, would not be so kind: especially those ones who actively sought him. Given his family name, the guillotine was high on the list of likely outcomes should he fall into their hands—once his brain was sucked dry that is.

All true and reasonable, from a certain cock-eyed perspective. So Julius jumped ahead several exchanges to the nub of the matter.

‘I have doubts,’ he said.

*** * ***

He’d said exactly the same thing when much writing and pleading secured him an interview with the Prime Minister. A four hour wait in an

overheated antechamber rubbing shoulders with Field Marshals and Admirals secured him two minutes of the great man's time.

'I have doubts,' concluded Julius, at the end of a long chain of argument, briskly stated.

The Duke of Wellington had not interrupted. Indeed, he'd nodded sympathetically and made notes as Frankenstein explained the whys and wherefore of his 'doubts.' Then The 'Iron Duke' looked up with his cold-as-iron eyes and said he would:

'Waste no time looking into it.'

A mere Swiss, innocent of the subtleties of the English language, Julius didn't straightaway understand.

Yet though Frankenstein was foreign he wasn't deaf. Before the door had even closed behind him he overheard the Duke tell his secretary:

'I never want to see that man again!'

*** * ***

Julius' present visitor and the Duke were obviously of one mind. The caller sighed but stoically forged on.

'We all have doubts from time to time, Frankenstein. Let me assure you that we do. Yet I am no priest or confessor. I have no more power to dispel your misgivings than I have my own. 'Doubt' is the lot of mankind until we are admitted beyond the veil. When doubtless we shall see clearly, if you'll excuse the pun. Meanwhile, we must live with it as best we can. Blame the War, Herr Frankenstein, blame the damn Frenchies if it helps. Meanwhile, make use of the days your eyes are graciously permitted to see. Utilise that gifted brain.'

It was an honest speech, as far as it went, with the menaces well in the background. The best Julius had had so far.

'I will think on what you say.'

The visitor studied him, undeluded, a stranger to illusions.

'Hmmm. Well, see that you do but don't dilly-dally about it. Meanwhile, think of me as a chimney-sweep. There is a blockage and a variety to methods to deal with it. First one tries the simple, gentler, less messy, means; then, if success does not attend, the more robust. Ultimately it is always open to a sweep to just thrust a brush up the chimney to… pop

the offending item out of there. And as to where that damned blockage falls: who knows? Or cares? It is of no worth to anyone.'

An unfortunate metaphor. The Hecatomb had a chimney which never rested. Up it went the surplus to requirement body parts, producing succulent smoke and spreading horrified sniffs all over Middlesex.

'I shall dwell on the simile this very day, Mr…'

The visitor arose and handed Julius his card.

The richly embossed rectangle simply read:

Sir Percy Blakeney

and nothing else. Which said a great deal.

* * *

Despite the jostling of his coach heading home, Sir Percy Blakeney jotted a note in Frankenstein's case file: 'Matthew. Ch.3 v.10.' (Which is to say: "Therefore every tree which bring not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.")

Then, after a brief ponder, he added: 'One more week. Then, if he's no use to us, make him no use to anyone else.'

Which was a coincidence. As his last act the day that Blakeney called, Julius Frankenstein added the following to his diary: 'One more week. If this purgatory hasn't improved by then, I give myself permission to blow my brains out.'

* * *

The seal on that resolution was set by the remainder of his daily routine. After Blakeney left, Julius retired to his office and doodled till his hand hurt. Then, after luncheon (local Heathrow guinea fowl and game-chips), he practised with his sabre for an hour before seeking diversion along the production line.

The architects' plans had envisaged steam-driven conveyer belts but it proved simpler to have bargain-basement Lazarans crank the wheels. They

didn’t require coal or maintenance and when they broke down were readily replaceable: hence no requirement for engineers hanging around. In fact, the whole development of steam-power had languished on that principle. Things stood much as they had since Mr Watt’s brainwave eighty years before. Abundant undead muscle-power removed the need for faltering development and brain-straining invention. Much money had thus been saved—at the expense of innovation.

The Lazarans’ colleagues-to-be came in from the surgeons’ shop stitched up and ready. Julius Frankenstein paused as a fresh batch were loaded on to the line and then cranked into position under the serum spears.

A click as the retainer was freed and a crash as the array fell.

Even now he still winced to see the spears pierce those still hearts. Wasted compassion: without sense there was no feeling. They remained mere retrieved meat from the battlefield and gallows.

Mostly the former today. When Frankenstein forced his eye to notice he saw the remnants of uniforms: a medley of costume from many different dead men.

Already the spear array was being hauled back up by rope, ready for the next set. Frankenstein moved along the line with the primed batch.

In the galvanising tank they had some privacy, if only on practical grounds. If Frankenstein accompanied them in there he would die when they received life.

Even an observation plate was deemed too risky. The frightful electric charge had to be constrained within seamless insulation. Anyway, the shrieks announced when the job was done.

On a whim, Frankenstein threw the switch himself, swatting the trusty-Lazaran aside. Instantly, the air crackled and an ozone aroma annoyed the nose. Behind the tank’s walls screaming began.

Theorists of Revivalist science speculated that rebirth was akin to being ripped from the womb, made worse by greater than new-born sentience. After the calm of the Great Beyond (for all anyone knew) the rush of sensation jumbled with memory was an agony beyond description. Or so those Lazarans capable of speech seemed to convey.

For Hecatomb staff with feelings left, it creased the heart to hear those revivals whose first word was ‘No!’

Frankenstein lingered to see the seals cracked and armed men crowd the door whilst technicians ventured into the cacophony to grade the

successes and cull rejects. Their practised eye easily distinguished between those fit only for soldiering or service, and the few that might aspire higher. Some among those could be sold at auction to the public as clerks and body servants, to boost the State's tottering finances. Any obvious towering intellects would be retained as civil servants, to relieve their living colleagues of routine duties.

Then labels were pinned on as appropriate, settling their new destiny. The useless balance meanwhile got the knife until they lay still again (which sometimes took time and effort), ready for recycling. Finally, all those thought worthy were unstrapped from the line and led away to life anew.

It was believed essential to start as you meant to go to on, and promptly, before any autonomous thoughts developed. The new recruits, confused and complaining, were chivvied into line and then marched off. No-nonsense sergeant-majors awaited them on the Hecatomb's parade ground.

Whereas back in his private laboratory, itself a miniature version of the Hecatomb's production line, a bottle of brandy awaited Julius Frankenstein, then supper, then his diary and then bed.

Barring a miracle, one-seventh of his remaining days was gone.

Chapter 3: A DAY IN THE DEATH OF LADY ADA LOVELACE

The day that she came, Frankenstein's diary would have read:

'Same. Breakfast. Pep talk. Doodling. Bed. Six days to live.'

save that just before bedtime he had another visitor.

Security at the Hecatomb was tight, but skewed towards preventing escape, not invasion. On the whole, the reputation of the place was its best defence against intruders: a bit like the Tower of London or Bedlam.

Even so, there were guards to counter the off-chance of French or Christian saboteurs. Great skill or wealth must have been required to shroud their eyes. Julius put his money on the latter.

'Good evening, sir,' said the stranger, in a soft-spoken voice.

His uninvited guest seemed courtly but looked otherwise. A prize-fighter turned flunky was Frankenstein's wager. Scrubbed-up and instructed in the non-spitting, non-swearing lifestyle when his pugilist prime was over. Most certainly not a Hecatomb staff member.

Frankenstein raised his glass.

'Good evening to you, dear fellow.'

'Dr. Frankenstein, I presume?'

Julius felt no great alarm: indeed, he felt no great anything at all lately. His sabre was within reach if need be.

'You presume correctly, sir. How may I oblige?'

'Permit me to first introduce myself, sir, and to apologise profusely for the interruption. I would not dream of intruding were not my purpose pressing. My name is Foxglove.'

'Do you have a calling card?'

'Not as such, sir, but I do have this.'

'Foxglove' drew a pistol from his coat and cocked it.

Frankenstein dismissively waved the aim aside.

'Fire away and do the world—and I—a favour. My present life holds little savour. Alas, sir, you choose to toot upon a muted trumpet…'

Foxglove accepted it on trust and returned the threat to store.

‘Forgive me, Doctor, but I had strict instructions to start thus. Were it my place to do so, I would have pointed out such considerations hold little weight with true gentlemen. Unfortunately, whilst my employer is a worthy person they are also inclined to be impetuous, even wild, you might say—and especially so at present. ‘Tis in their blood you see, though do not mistake me to imply criticism by it. But I assure you, sir, they have good cause. In those circumstances, might I be permitted to begin again with sweet reason?’

Frankenstein smiled.

‘You may as well,’ he said, ‘since you are here. As a mere foreigner, kept nigh prisoner in this ghastly place since reaching these shores, almost any diversion is welcome.’

Foxglove raised one eyebrow (near the full extent of his permitted emotional range, Julius suspected) in sympathy.

‘I commiserate sir. Nevertheless, that same internationally acknowledged expertise in your field which binds you here is also the reason for our interview.’

Though not the scientist his late uncle hoped (and late father feared) he would become, Julius could extrapolate the present data into an elegant theory.

‘If it’s Lazarans you require, I cannot—indeed, will not—oblige. The black market attracts capital punishment and though, as I state, my current existence holds few charms, neither am I minded to quit life via what you English call the ‘Tyburn clog dance.’ Nor does my moral code permit cooperation. If—and I stress if, sir—I were minded to be helpful I should merely inform you there are alternative sources of supply. Certain depraved surgeons would comply, I’m sad to say. Find one made reckless by drink or debts and there’s your man. Or you could even attempt what I believe is termed a ‘home-bake’…’

Foxglove looked pained by such second-hand crudity.

‘There remains the need for serum, sir,’ he reminded, still courtly.

Frankenstein scoffed.

‘Serum? Bah! The very dogs in the street know that to be just an activated admix of formaldehyde, egg-yolk, alcohol and… ahem, vital seed…’

Still the visitor stuck to his guns.

‘Possibly so, sir. But those same well-informed canines cannot help with the matter of relative proportions. Nor with that ‘admixing’ you referred to. All highly rarefied tasks, I’m told; requiring specialist skills. Not to mention the ‘activation’…’

‘Well, yes,’ conceded Frankenstein, ‘there is that. You cannot afford to get any component wrong…’

So-called ‘half-bakes’ were justifiably the stuff of legend and nightmare. The fortunate among them soon exploded, but others had been known to ‘live’ for years, to the horror of all, including themselves.

Frankenstein recalled himself from reverie.

‘But you need not have penetrated this grim edifice to learn such commonplaces,’ he said. ‘And on that subject, how did you penetrate here?’

‘Sacks of sovereigns,’ said Foxglove succinctly, also conveying decent distaste.

‘Mankind…,’ mused Frankenstein, mostly to himself, ‘how can one fail to love it…?’

‘Indeed so, sir. But not all men are mercenary. I know I am not, for all my failings. Nor, I trust and pray, are you. Reflect, if you will, on what brings me here, at risk of life and limb, not to mention terror. For I am bound by ties of loyalty and gratitude. Were it not so I would be far away and in safety and comfort. As it is, I have lost all: home, position, good name, everything but honour, to be here to speak to you. Concede then, that some men act unselfishly for the good…’

Frankenstein waggled his hand.

‘My Father believed thus,’ he said. ‘And his brother, the most famous or infamous of my family once believed thus. As for myself, I waver. However, pray continue…’

‘My instructions,’ said Foxglove, ‘prescribe pleas and promises of enrichment should threats fail. Monstrous enrichment…’

Again, Julius just waved the prospect away. Mention of monsters was not a happy choice of phrase, and nor was gold a starting motor in him. The visitor perceived both mistakes and quickly moved on, guided by the light of instinct.

‘However,’ he said, ‘I will dare to disobey and skip such sordidness to ask one thing, and one thing alone, of you: will you meet my patron? She waits on the Heath.’

Bedtime and a restart of the grey cycle was the only alternative. Frankenstein shrugged to signify ‘why not?’

* * *

Normally, Frankenstein needed written permission to visit the Heath, but the same sovereigns that got Foxglove in now let Julius out. They also hired him a cloak of invisibility and mini holiday from the Hecatomb. Outside, a carriage awaited with a passenger inside.

As greying twenty-something women went, Foxglove’s mistress was worth seeing: some might even say she was attractive. Necrophiliacs especially. That face, though pointy-nosed, might once have been thought piquant and pretty. However, Julius Frankenstein had met enough dead people for one day (and lifetime).

He withdrew from the coach-window. The ice packed round its sole inhabitant made the interior appropriately tomb-like. In passing, he noted the rich livery and scrolled ‘L’ painted on the door. Some faint association stirred but couldn’t get to its feet to introduce itself.

‘Well,’ Julius told Foxglove, acidly, ‘it was perfectly… average to make her acquaintance. We really ought to do this a lot less often…’

The servant remained charmed.

‘She has — had — her father’s likeness,’ he reflected, drawing on happier memories. ‘He was a loveable rogue —though I grant the balance between the two qualities varied vastly. Of course, presently you cannot note the family wild eyes…’

‘No indeed. ‘Tis the practice to close them when laying out a corpse.’

He instantly repented of his sarcasm when he saw Foxglove shudder. His loss was too recent for levity.

‘You are taking a risk here,’ Frankenstein added out of charity. Heathrow is not safe at night even for armed coaches, whereas you are but one man and a cadaver. Doubtless, you also bribed the sentries to shield your vehicle and… cargo, but it will soon come to notice. Be on your way and give her decent burial. The old adage is trite but true: grief yields to time…’

For a second, Julius thought he’d gone too far and Foxglove was reaching for his gun again. Happily, before Frankenstein had his response

underway a letter was produced instead.

‘Read, I beg you…’

Julius looked back to the looming Hecatomb. If any director should see, or an unbribed guard betray him, there would be need for explanation and written reports. He bit his lip in indecision.

Foxglove was more subtle than he looked (not that that was saying much).

‘The night is long, Doctor, but my lady’s message short…’

That played upon the right strings. And he saw that it was personally addressed to him.

Julius broke the seal and unfolded the missive.

At top were two impressive coats of arms, embossed and in colour. Then a bold hand took only a few lines to cover the whole page with confident script, richly expressive of the author. It flowed wastefully free over on to pages two and three.

> ‘My dearest Herr Frankenstein,
>
> If you are reading this, then I am gone. Moreover, it must be presumed that my revival has been forbidden or thwarted, despite explicit instructions.
>
> I am NOT content with that. I wish to return. My life’s work is not yet complete.
>
> You are foremost in your field and kin of its inventor. You have access to finest serum. Therefore, I could ask for no better person to restore me to full life.
>
> Assiduous research (insurance against this awful day) makes me feel that I know you already. You will not fail me.
>
> Therefore, I will not insult you with offers of wealth or position, though both are mine to grant should you so wish.
>
> Rather, my dear Julius—may I call you Julius? I offer you ESCAPE &, what is better, ADVENTURE.
>
> Such is my sure promise from beyond the grave and shall be repeated—even put in contract, if you demand—when we meet amongst the living.
>
> From, I assure you, your most fervent and true admirer:
>
> Lady Ada Augusta Lovelace, nee Byron.’

Julius Frankenstein didn’t even have to think. Now they were talking! Why didn’t they say so in the first place?

* * *

Geo. Washington: ‘This “serum”, sir, by which you work your blasphemous horrors, what is it comprised of?’

Victor Frankenstein: ‘Essential oils, Mr President; a complex melange of mixed vivifying chemicals, to which is added a tincture of the electrical fluid. And, with all due respect, sir, that much detail must suffice.’

Washington: ‘How so, sir? Do you impute to us sordid commercial ambitions? Do you think we mean to rob you of your patent?’ *[Uproar in the house]*.

Frankenstein *[shouting to be heard]*: ‘No indeed, sir. On the contrary, my reticence stems from far higher motives. I decline to describe the precise formula only because amateurs attempting the Revivalist process have resulted in the production of impermissible monsters! Therefore, when it comes to serum, Mr President, I assure you that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing.’

Washington *[pausing, with great solemnity]*: ‘Indeed, sir, I do not doubt it. And therefore how much more dangerous is your entire knowledge.’

Transcript extract from ‘Submissions to the Congressional Committee on the Legalisation of REVIVALISM, popularly known as Corpse-raising.’ 13th July 1793.

* * *

‘When did she die?’

‘Two days ago,’ answered Foxglove. ‘Foully murdered.’

Julius’ question arose from professional interest and required asking even though his hands were full. The onset of decay was harmful to the Revival process. Therefore he should have stopped there and got on with his preparations. However, the extra detail supplied sparked mere curiosity.

‘How? Who?’

‘A severe blow to the head. As you will see, Mr Frankenstein, sir, the family surgeon who attended the scene closed the gaping fracture for cosmetic reasons, because a public laying-in period was intended—before I purloined the mistress’s remains that is. If your ministrations are successful the damage should heal.’

Julius probed the relevant area with skilful fingers. Scarlet sealing wax! It would do, but some more lasting form of cap would be necessary in the long term—if there was one. Meanwhile, caution and laudanum should see Ada through the recovery period—if he chose to go through with this.

Disturbed by these attentions Ada’s locks released a waft of spice, despite death and chilling. Long deprived of such sensations, Julius discovered himself more than usually hopeful his charge would tread the long path back.

He let the cold head return to the pillow and surveyed the whole. A pale vision in a scarlet gown with green buttons. It was strange that so evident a beauty hadn’t attended to the premature greying of her crowning glory. It hinted at a character worth the risk of snatching from Heaven.

‘Fasten the leg straps whilst I attend to her hands.’

Julius had better qualified assistants on call but there wasn’t time to bribe or persuade them. The guards who admitted the coach and swallowed Julius’ ‘special ladyfriend’ explanation had delayed them enough already. Besides, Foxglove had disgorged yet more money to buy them and Frankenstein wanted there to be some left for after. ‘Escape’ and ‘adventure’ rarely came cheap.

In deference to the skull trauma, he rigged up a neck restraint also. Quite often renewed life wasn’t welcome, or last painful memories were still lodged in the brain: therefore, frenzied thrashing about was by no means uncommon. Vocal distress likewise, so a gag was applied too. They’d already pushed their luck with excess activity disturbing the normally silent Heathrow night. Screams (or unscheduled screams) inside the Hecatomb would almost certainly wake unwelcome attention.

Frankenstein’s private laboratory was a dolls’ house version of the main production line. Therein, he’d been expected to work the wonders Governments believed inherent in his family name. Devoid of inspiration or inclination he had proved a sad let-down so far and daily expected expulsion to menial work: if he were lucky. The arrival of high-ups like

Blakeney suggested exalted impatience and that the dread day would not be long delayed.

Therefore, Ada's arrival might be that luck. Julius hadn't considered that before. All his own planning seemed to end in dead-ends like beggary or bullets in the back whilst trying to escape. Or, worst of all, boredom. This wild-card could be his last chance at playing a decent hand in the game of life…

Which made his mind up.

'I suggest,' he said, 'that you avert your eyes.'

Foxglove, worried but entirely in another's hands now, reluctantly turned his back on the zinc table where his mistress lay.

Julius parted the scarlet gown with two hands, baring Ada's breasts. Then he reached up to position the primed serum spear.

'You never did say who…'

Mainly he desired to distract Foxglove during the most distressing part of the process, but he also wanted to know.

''Who,' sir?'

'Who killed her…'

Foxglove clenched his huge scar-coated fists.

'Her Lazaran lover, who went berserk as such beasts do. If you could believe such a slander of such a woman. Alas, Lord Lovelace did. He went through the motions of requesting revival but did not demur at its speedy refusal.'

Frankenstein threw a lever and impelled by lead weights the serum spear descended. It penetrated spot on, deeply piercing the dead heart.

No blood flowed, demonstrating life was long gone. The body jumped once at the impact but returned to repose.

Gruesome sound effects almost made Foxglove turn but he restrained himself.

'It… will not hurt her?'

'A fractured rib perhaps, probably a lingering ache. Certainly a lasting scar. All but the last will pass. A small price to pay for life anew.'

'Ah yes… and it shall be the best serum, as we agreed?'

'I am provided with a select store: the much distilled sort used for reviving generals and the like: royalty even. The same stuff that runs in Neo-Nelson's veins. It was intended for my experimental program which

proved sadly stillborn. So, having no use for the stuff, I shall not stint it now.'

Ada probably had pale skin even before Death made her pallor permanent. Now she was stuck with it. Not even the vintage serum being forced under pressure through her body cells would alter that, for all its high quality. It was one of the defining features of the Revived and no method yet discovered could alter that. When life returned a Lazaran might spend its entire un-life pearl-diving under tropic suns and still remain 'pale and interesting.'

Frankenstein took hold of his patient's right hand and foot. He sought and found the faint plumping that said the steam-spear had done its work, pushing serum to the far extremities.

Whilst the Galvanism tank warmed up, Julius brought Foxglove back in to fill the pregnant pause and save some sweat.

'You can turn around now. Help me roll her in.'

If he'd expected miracles in the interval, the faithful retainer was disabused. Lady Lovelace remained as she was: mere breathless meat with a tenderised head.

'Crank the wheel when I say. Ready? One, two, three, go!'

Julius Frankenstein was young and hale but it was still arduous work setting in motion a mechanism meant for two. Foxglove's brawn provided ideal assistance. The conveyor belt fairly shot Ada into the open maw of the tank in one fluid motion.

Frankenstein hid her from view and fastened the heavy seals.

'I should stand back. Leaping arcs are not unknown.'

A rubberised mat was provided for the purpose. Julius beckoned Foxglove over to join him on it.

'You don't believe that explanation then?' he asked.

With but one topic occupying his mind the visitor knew what was meant.

'The murder story? Indeed not, sir. Those who knew her Ladyship recognise the wicked imposture for what it is. Or they should. Sadly, Lord Lovelace was not of that number. Perhaps his mind was misled by grief and shame, but he remains at fault. Sorry as I was for him, my obligations to his house severed that day.'

'So she wasn't a Lazarophile? It does happen you know: bored aristo ladies appreciative of super-human staying power. Plus there's attractions in

a lover who doesn't get in your hair afterwards…'

Foxglove's face was eloquent answer enough.

'Not a flighty piece at all…?' Julius persisted. The hum from the tank had not yet reached its optimum.

'No.' The reply was firm, not encouraging any challenge. 'Madam's passions lay elsewhere. In realms of the utmost propriety.'

Julius was minded to say 'pity' but thought better of it.

'Then who? And why?'

Foxglove drew a deep breath.

'Those questions are projects for another day. We shall see what Her Ladyship says.'

His confidence was flattering but misguided. The public didn't realise Revivalism was not an exact science. Persuading a critical mass of atoms to resume work when they thought their job was done and eternal rest in order, required both skill and luck. Many cadavers were stubborn (or safely ensconced in Heaven, according to theologians) and the failure rate significant. Yet even a failure was better than a botched job: the halfway returns were terrible to see—and hear. It was a kindness to send them straight back to oblivion.

For Julius such thoughts sponsored inner pictures of scenes he'd witnessed as an army field surgeon. Unfortunately some things seen can't be unseen.

Frankenstein gladly left his mind's-eye version of the Battle of the Vatican for even this present. The whine from within the tank was almost transcending human range. He checked the gauge and its fail-safe twin and then threw the remote-lever.

Dynamo columns atop the tank lit up like lightning-struck trees. They exchanged arcs of power and fed them back into the container. Dust on its surface hovered in sprightly blue-lit dance.

In the absence of screams or any other sign Frankenstein gave it an extra second but dared no more than that. The only thing worse than half-returns were what the Hecatomb wits called 'fry-ups.'

How he hated the English way with words! Other nations would have been more… indirect, more delicate.

The lever was lifted and the dynamos died. Residual sparks gradually subsided.

One way or the other, they hadn’t long now. The power usage would register on every other Hecatomb system. The duty officer might assume it was just the useless foreigner burning some midnight oil for a change—or he might not.

Donning protective gauntlets Frankenstein opened the door a fraction sooner than was prescribed. Burnt ozone wafted out.

‘Give me a hand again.’

They reversed the belt drive and Ada emerged head first.

She was still pearl white, not charcoal black: which was a good sign. She lay absolutely still, which was not.

Nevertheless, Frankenstein removed the restraints and observed the exposed chest for signs of heaving. There were none.

Foxglove frowned.

‘Slap her,’ Julius ordered.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘It works with babies and likewise Lazarans. You wouldn’t like seeing me do it…’

Foxglove hesitated. It went against Nature —or his nature—every bit as much as raising the dead.

‘Hurry!’ said Frankenstein. ‘Do you want this thing or not? The opportunity is fleeting. Oh—I see your problem…’

The English were brutal but bashful: a Frenchman or Italian would have jumped at the chance.

Frankenstein spelt it out.

‘No, man: not exactly as with babies: I meant slap her face.’

Foxglove almost panicked but recovered. He marked his target and then shut his eyes.

Smack!

Ada’s head rolled in response to the blow: her sole response.

‘Again!’ said Julius.

Smack!

Back the other way went Ada’s face.

Foxglove looked at Frankenstein in extremities of distress.

‘Can you not repeat the process?’

Julius shook his head.

‘One attempt is all that is meaningful. You may have to reconcile yourself that perhaps she is —’

Smack! Smack!

Foxglove delivered without restraint.

Julius suddenly realised that the corpse's face was reddened where the blows fell. Which implied…

Ada's eyes flicked open. Foxglove's next strike was too far advanced to cancel.

'Owwww!' she said. 'How… how dare you?'

The servant flinched back, both mortified and awash with joy. Each flickered briefly across his normally impassive face.

Ada Lovelace sat up like a jack-in-the-box. There was obviously more energy in that slight frame than met the eye.

Speaking of which, as a doctor (albeit a mere military one) Julius recalled from his studies that all eyeballs were of identical mass, and that only eyelid variations gave the illusion otherwise. Yet Ada Lovelace's face seemed dominated by windows to the soul of extraordinary size and sauciness.

She felt her face and rubbed it. Previous paleness returned. She next noted her display of more cleavage than decorum allowed and sought to repair Julius' careless undressing.

Only then did she deign to view the wider world. First Foxglove.

'Hmmm…' she said, with neither gratitude nor reproach.

Then Frankenstein.

'Hmmm…'

Julius had been brought up with Swiss manners before he learnt less starchy Italianate, and then anything-goes English, ways. He bowed politely.

'Lady Lovelace. Welcome back to this wicked world.'

She did not acknowledge him but swung her long legs to the floor via a flash of silk stocking.

'That 'wicked world' awaits us,' she said to both all and none—but proving she must have heard. 'Foxglove, fetch my coach.'

*** * ***

Foxglove not only fetched it, he proposed to drive it, for there was no one else. From having a horde at her beck and call Ada Lovelace was

reduced to just one lacky.

Not two. When Frankenstein joined them in the waiting vehicle, Ada looked at him like a side dish no one had ordered.

‘Foxglove!’ she called through the carriage roof. ‘Is this man coming with us? What did you offer him?’

‘Only as per your letter, milady.’

‘Hmmm…’

She had a rich variety of those, all meaning something subtly different. Meanwhile, she studied Julius up and down.

Frankenstein felt it was time he had an input.

‘Escape and adventure were the core contractual features, madam. You promised both.’

Ada had a hat now. She threw back her bonnet and laughed heartily.

‘Did I? Did I really?’

‘Those were your very words. And now my bridges are burnt I must hold you to them.’

Lady Lovelace was selectively deaf. It was as if he’d never replied.

‘I see he has packed a bag, Foxglove; plainly meaning to accompany us. What do you think?’

‘He’s sound,’ said the voice from the driving seat. ‘But I’ll be guided by you, milady.’

Ada fixed Julius with her gorgeous eyes.

‘Do you have pen and paper, herr doctor?’

Packing hastily (for the guard’s bribed blindness wouldn’t last forever) those were indeed amongst the few items he’d scraped into a case to take with him. Latterly, all Frankensteins travelled light. Julius demonstrated to her that he owned both.

Ada smiled and snatched them.

‘He’s in, Foxglove. Drive on!’

*** * ***

As with her revival, Ada’s next step presumably followed a pre-laid plan. Not being a party to it, Frankenstein sat back and relaxed as Foxglove clattered along the Great West Road, heading only God and he knew where.

Hounslow went by in the dark, then progressively larger villages and miles of thriving market gardens till they were skirting the outskirts of the Capital. Finally, they came to a halt before the Turnham Green Bastion and awaited—so Frankenstein presumed—the opening of the gates at dawn. Unseen hands trained wall-guns upon them.

Fortunately, there were other untimely or impatient travellers, and a small collection of conveyances and horsemen gathered close together for mutual protection from the perils of the night. For it was a known fact that the lightless hours were the preserve of feral humans and rogue-Lazarans, to which legend added were-creatures and vampires as well.

Though rarely known to attack so close to civilisation, precautions against such threats were always advisable. Therefore the coaches were manoeuvred into a circle and a watch set. Armed with a blunderbuss, Foxglove took on all the sentry duties assigned to three.

Meanwhile, inside her vehicle, Ada ignored her new companion just as she did the wonder of returned life. Instead, she sat hunched over Julius' loaned notebook, scribbling furiously into it. And increasingly furious: for from time to time she wrenched out pages in a rage or viciously scored through what she'd written. Sometimes, the pen was jabbed so hard it pierced straight through the page, or ink flew from the companion pot. Likewise little gasps of frustration escaped her Ladyship's pursed lips, plus occasional most unladylike hisses of hate.

Frankenstein stayed by her side but left her to it. There was wisdom in his inaction for he had nowhere else to go and it was as well not to show his face to the world so soon. The Hecatomb's working day would be starting shortly, and shortly after he'd be missed. Also, Lady Lovelace didn't seem the sort for small talk.

Julius only wished Ada's schemes hadn't included a liveried coach. It proclaimed her presence as good as a flag, and Bastion guards would recall it. However, there was nothing to link him and the ex-deceased just yet. The association needn't be fatal to him moving discreetly for a while.

Then, just as the huge windlasses creaked to open London's gates to another day, Ada deigned to notice her companion once more.

She threw the book at him. It bounced off Frankenstein's forehead, leaving an angry mark.

Her eyes glared at him, equally angry.

'Charlatan!' she spat. 'Fraud! Where is my spark?'

Chapter 4: NO FIRE WITHOUT A SPARK

‘I want it! I want it! I want it!’

Ada contained herself only for as long as the innkeeper could overhear. The second the door was shut she was at Julius again.

Where he came from, a second—and most certainly a third—feminine slap to the face merited a right hook in return, and chivalry be damned. However, Frankenstein restrained himself because Foxglove was standing watchfully by. A room-wrecking full-blown brawl would not be helpful now they had finally found sanctuary.

Ada’s eyes blazed: when she gave herself to something she gave all. Yet she had less to give than before: her palm was as cold as her fury was hot.

Julius caught her wrists as they sought to drum a tattoo on his chest. They too were icy. He surreptitiously sought a pulse, knowing full well of all people that he sought in vain. Lazaran hearts beat once an hour, if that.

‘Well, you can’t have it,’ he replied calmly. ‘Even if I knew what you were talking about…’

Ada wrenched herself free.

‘I’ve lost my spark!’ she accused Frankenstein. ‘It’s gone! Beforehand, I was a genius, now there’s no inspiration. I’m just… living, like all the rest of you!’

An unkind man would have pointed out some glaring errors in her statement, but there was an certain etiquette in dealing with the Revived. Not to mention common compassion.

‘What can I say, madam?’ said Julius, drawing back from claw range. ‘You enjoyed the very finest serum known. More than that I cannot bestow.’

Ada thought on, studying him all the while, rubbing her wrists to which not even Julius’ grip had restored colour.

‘Hmmm…’

‘I swear to it, madam.’

‘Do you now? But shall we believe him? What do you think, Foxglove?’

The servant had a very cool appraising gaze when he chose to lift the mask.

‘I believe him, milady.’

‘Damn!’ she said.

Frankenstein gasped. He’d not heard a female swear since his army days: and even then only from ‘camp-wives’ and pipe-smoking whores.

Ada Lovelace waved him away—out of sight and out of mind.

‘I take it,’ she observed to Foxglove, ‘from all this *folle-de-rol* that my husband, his Lordship, is going to be of no use to us.’

‘Alas no, milady. He sought permission for your revival and the refusal contained no ambiguity. A gentlemen from the Home Office even called in person at Horsley Towers to stress the point. And Lord Lovelace, though he protested, is a very law-abiding sort of gentleman…’

‘Not to mention Lord-Lieutenant of the County of Surrey,’ Ada added in contempt. ‘With a position in society to consider. Which is why,’ she turned to Frankenstein to point out an important lesson to a poor foreigner, ‘there’ll never be a revolution in this rotten country. Someone might have to walk on the grass!’

Having been in countries where civic unrest crammed the mortuaries Julius felt inclined to see that as a blessing, but didn’t say so.

‘Also,’ added Foxglove, ‘there were the… circumstances of your demise, milady.’

‘Circumstances? Explain!’

Foxglove looked embarrassed and advanced to whisper in her ear. Her eyes widened still further, although blushes were now out of the question.

‘As a mere bachelor,’ commented Julius (who knew all already), ‘it may not be for me to say, but I think you are a little harsh on Lord Lovelace. Evidence of a Lazaran lover is hardly calculated to fire his love for you…’

Ada withered him with a glance.

‘On the contrary,’ she countered enigmatically, ‘I’d say the scene was “calculated” with exquisite precision.’

But she left it at that and thought on, rapt and in a world all her own.

‘Very well,’ came her eventual decision. ‘I divorce him, I divorce him, I divorce him. And that’s that and his Lordship out of the way, Mohammedan style. Next thing is getting my spark back: I can’t live other than as a genius. We’ll go see the only other one I know and see what he suggests.’

* * *

Mr Babbage wasn't at home. Or if he was he'd have to stay there, because a Metropolitan Police ribbon sealed the front door.

Ada Lovelace hammered away even so. Julius could hear the knocker echo through an obviously empty house.

They'd driven the coach to Westminster in the face of Frankenstein's vehement protests. Lady Lovelace still hadn't got it into her head that she was Lady Lovelace no longer, not in the eyes of the Law, nor probably those of her husband who, moreover, she'd just self-service divorced. That meant the liveried coach was bogus as well as unwise. Yet Ada's confidence had trampled all over Frankenstein's bleatings. They arrived at Dorset Street in style.

To no welcome. Lady Lovelace was puzzled. She associated empty houses with the owners decamping to their country estates, or maybe departure on a grand tour. Yet she knew Babbage was too obsessed for either. The police barrier was worrisome too.

Though surely coincidence, the militia galloon choosing just then to slowly traverse the sky above their heads, did nothing for their peace of mind. It probably was looking for riots and revolutionaries, not them—not yet. Still, the low lament of its frantically pedalling Lazaran crew slung below the canopy was hardly confidence building. Julius cast about for help or shelter.

It is a cross-cultural truth that guttersnipes are better informed than governments. One arrived unbidden at precisely the right moment bearing newspapers and intelligence.

''Oi, toffs!' the boy called from beyond the railings. 'Are you friends of the bloke wot lived there?'

Julius acted as spokesman: his companions didn't care to acknowledge such converse.

'We might be. What of it?'

The boy blew Frankenstein a great big kiss and ran off laughing.

'Mmmm,' mused Ada.

* * *

Foxglove sought out fuller particulars in nearby shops and hostelries whilst Ada and Julius waited in the coach. They sat in silence, not even of the companionable sort.

Eventually, her manservant returned and told all with a most becoming blush. Among other upshots, apparently the members of Babbage's Gentlemen's club had left a loaded pistol in his pigeon-hole, for use in the unlikely event he ever darkened their doors again. Plus a note spelling out their flattering confidence that he would 'do the decent thing.'

'Spark or no spark,' said Lady Lovelace, 'I begin to perceive patterns…'

'Pretty patterns?' enquired Julius.

'Hardly: but consistent ones, suggesting intelligent design. Death and disgrace are the predominant themes. You must take my word for it, herr doctor, but my friend and collaborator, Mr Babbage, was a man of science; not a Uranian or deviant of any kind. Just as I am no jezebel lazarophile consorting with undead lovers. Someone is weaving a story to our detriment and I must calculate who and why. It is therefore all the more imperative I retrieve my spark of inspiration.'

Julius Frankenstein nodded surrender to her imperatives. Short of drawing pictures, he had explained the limitations of his reviving powers as clearly as could be.

'If you say so, madam. And how do you propose to do it, may I ask?'

Lady Lovelace looked at him like he was an idiot.

'Yes, you may.'

Seconds of silence ensued —unless Julius' teeth grinding was audible to the others. His will broke first.

'How-do-you-propose-to-do-it,' he said, through powdered enamel.

Ada's answer was bright and breezy, considering.

'Why,' she said, 'the way I always got everything, of course. By buying it. Foxglove! To the Bank!'

*** * ***

In a curious parallel to Ada's revived life-force, everything was as before for her at Baring's Bank—save for the heart of the matter.

Recognition was there, and courtesy; even obsequious service likewise—but not her money.

Whilst Julius was about his own business elsewhere, Lady Lovelace went through a succession of clerks as her voice ascended the octaves, but still no funds were forthcoming. At last she saw someone so senior he could speak the plain truth.

The melancholy fact was, the manager explained, that Lady Lovelace was dead—or legally so. Her whey face and the Times both confirmed it. He did not know how it came about that she was here demanding access to the family account, nor would he dream of daring to enquire. However, one thing was certain: people came into the world with nothing and left it likewise. Both scripture and Baring's Bank said so. Accordingly, and with the profoundest, the politest, of regrets, he could not oblige her.

Ada swore for the second time that day.

*** * ***

In a stolen mansion beside the North Downs, a human spider considered the twitchings of his web.

A coach sighting here, a visit to a sealed house there, an altercation in England's oldest banking house—and all in one day. What a busy revenant she was! How well he'd chosen.

Everything was going splendidly and it almost reconciled him to the earlier shedding of blood. That had been difficult and not his style at all. So sad. Only a great cause and the sense of history hovering anxiously at his shoulder had persuaded the human spider to inject venom with his bite.

Now things were going smoothly he could be gentle again.

'Just a nudge,' he informed an underling, who would inform his underling who would inform his underlings—and so on. 'No unpleasantness, but the merest propelling prod…'

The human spider had a horror of haste, and of enthusiasm even more so. Both led to all sorts of errors. For that reason he strictly instructed his staff that they should pleasure their wives or, at a pinch, themselves, before reporting to work each day. It was imperative there be no unresolved impulses fizzing around in office hours to cloud judgements or make them heavy handed.

Fortunately, most were French and so could be relied upon to comply without him checking. However, the English ones proved harder work and wife substitutes had to be procured for some. Eventually though, such sensitive matters were resolved and the human spider could relax and be confident: confident that whatever hints he cared to drop would be converted into action in the world beyond his web. But always seemly and conservative action; kindly too, if at all possible.

Which left the human spider free for wine, women and song—though being in his ninth decade his doctor had advised he ease up on the singing.

Chapter 5: WITHDRAWALS

Lady Lovelace put down her sandwich.

‘Do I actually need this? she asked. ‘I feel no hunger. Not the slightest pang since I rose like Lazarus.’

The inn beside London Westgate had laid on an excellent luncheon in Ada’s room. Frankenstein had insisted, overruling her lack of interest.

‘It is essential,’ he answered firmly, raising the bread and beef to her mouth again. ‘Though the serum sustains you, your raised body must also be placated. You will not wish me to supply the gross details, madam, but suffice to say that if your digestive system is not kept occupied it will rot. Shortly afterwards you will rot with it. Vivid-green gangrene, proof against the lustiest surgeon’s knife. Therefore, though food has no savour to you and never will again, you must—if you will forgive the phrase—go through the motions…’

She plainly did not forgive the phrase but Julius slid another slice of pie onto her plate, and then jiggled it back and forth in a way intended to be tempting.

‘Eat, madam,’ he said, ‘I implore you. If you eat well—or leastways regularly—you will last as long as your body does!’

Ada eyed pie and Julius with twin distaste.

‘Which is how long exactly?’

Though her tone was peevish this was not idle curiosity on her part, but a vital missing element in ongoing calculations.

Frankenstein shrugged.

‘It depends on you. And Fate, of course. Revivalist Science is yet young and few figures exist on which to theorise. The vast majority of the Revived spend—and I use the term advisedly—their lives either on the battlefield or farmers’ fields. Neither are conducive to longevity. However, it may cheer you to learn that I knew of one Lazaran who outlived his owner: a man who departed this Life in the fullness of years…’

Alas, honesty then compelled him to add: ‘Although his heirs had it—I beg your pardon, him—put down soon after. That the servant should just… continue struck them as indecent, you see…’

‘I see,’ said Lady Lovelace, when she obviously did not.

‘But in theory, there is no firm upper limit. Consider, madam: perhaps you now possess Life—of a kind—everlasting!’

‘Hmmm…,’ she said. Supplemented by ‘Hmmph!’ Then: ‘away with your honeyed words, mein herr: Life without my spark is no life!’

Even that was not enough: chagrin made her want to twist the knife.

‘Are you really a doctor?’

She’d sulked throughout the meal so far, barely speaking to him. Therefore Julius realised that the question was born of more than spite.

‘Of a sort, madam,’ he answered. ‘Of the military sort.’

Ada gave him a cool look—and saw. No medical man he, but thwarted scientist through and through. A compromise career choice therefore, possibly a dictated one, comprising a life-defining mistake. Hence the hidden turbulence beneath the still surface of those deep waters.

‘Meaning a mere amputator,’ she said. ‘Plus a Revivalist, of course.’

For all its present utility, in social esteem the job title ranked alongside ‘abortionist.’ As Ada well knew.

‘Of course,’ Frankenstein agreed, in arctic tones. ‘The family curse.’

So she’d guessed right. Probably the father was to blame: pressing his son into the military where he could only do moderate harm.

Ada favoured him with her full attention—and a beaming smile!

‘A curse to you perhaps but not to all, mein herr. It may interest you to know that my headaches are quite gone. Presumably, I can attribute that to your ministrations.’

‘Headaches, madam?’

‘I was a martyr to them: sickening pain lodged behind the eyes for days on end, enlivened by lightning storms in the brain. Sometimes I could barely speak, is that not so, Foxglove? I suffered and, what is far more important, my great work suffered. Company was intolerable to me and life scarcely less so. Your treatment seems to have banished them.’

Amongst other Revivalists he might have ventured an explanation along the ‘no sense no feeling’ line, but for such a prickly patient Julius sugared the pill.

‘The post mortem brain has ways all its own, my lady, and none of them well understood. I cannot claim credit for this happy accident. Indeed, one would have predicted only increased sufferings due to your cranial injuries.’

Lady Lovelace involuntarily reached to the back of her head where a circle of tinplate now protected her fracture. A local blacksmith, chosen for drink-dulled lack of curiosity, had provided that. Then a lady stylist procured by the inn had skilfully hidden it under hair so that no one could see.

How Ada had fumed and glared as the smithy had tapped its tacks in. Now, back on mission, she required reminding of its existence.

‘Hmmm…,’ she said. ‘Well, be that as it may, I greet the liberation with joy. My spark might be—temporarily—mislaid, but I now find my mundane thought processes wonderfully… uninterrupted.’

If so, they were in marked contrast to their meal. The door slammed open and interruptions galore flowed in.

In the form of officers of the law. A bustle of four or five of them crowding into the room. The foremost held up some legal document.

‘Lady Ada Augusta Lovelace,’ he read, without bothering about introductions, ‘inasmuch as you have been plucked from the grave without sanction of God and man, in impudent contravention of the statutes of both the English Realm and the Almighty, it is the order of His Majesty’s High Court that your arrest…’

Julius had heard enough and fired.

Simultaneously—to slow human eyes—a blackened circle appeared both in the paper and the reader’s chest. The man looked amazed from one to the other and then sank slowly to his knees.

Frankenstein was expecting congratulations for his foresight in having a pistol to hand, but instead all eyes in the room conveyed horror. The constables were frozen in shock, and Lady Lovelace and Foxglove likewise. They studied their luncheon companion of a minute ago entirely anew.

You just can’t please some people. Julius thought he’d done well, making such prompt use of his earlier purchase. Therefore, he’d hoped for gratitude, but the English were a funny lot, and Ada Lovelace more so than most. It was all rather a puzzle, but not one Frankenstein had leisure to solve. Instead, he took control of the situation with his second pistol.

‘Foxglove,’ he suggested, ‘why don’t you disarm them?’

One constable had recovered enough to look at Frankenstein with loathing.

‘Maybe because we’re not armed?’ the man ventured, with bitter sarcasm.

Julius shrugged. ‘More fool you then. Right, Foxglove, just check he speaks true and then grab our bags. I’ll keep these invaders occupied in the interval.’

He waggled the levelled weapon threateningly. ‘Come, come, gentlemen: I must insist! Hands up or I’ll fire!’

They had good evidence he might mean it. Arms shot aloft.

A flurry of patting proved the enforcers of the Law had indeed ventured out unarmed: innocent of even a truncheon! Julius boggled: how on earth had these people acquired an Empire?

Frankenstein felt the need for haste: any minute now there might be footsteps on the stairs—the first brave explorers investigating the sound of gunfire.

‘Ready?’ he asked.

Foxglove didn’t have words but he had their luggage. His ham-like arms lifted the bags as evidence.

Julius urged Ada out of statue-mode.

‘Come along, my lady.’

To her credit, Ada didn’t hesitate. She didn’t say anything but she didn’t protest either. Her lustrous eyes were finding it hard to leave Julius’ gesticulating gun.

As he passed, Frankenstein pillaged the dead man of any items of use, and likewise scooped up the holed legal document.

‘Some reading for the journey,’ he explained to its former owners. They shrank against the wall, making way according to the stage directions of his weapon.

‘Help yourself to the food,’ Julius suggested as he locked the door after him, imprisoning them—for a while.

‘Murderer!’ came the accusation straightaway, loud and clear through the oak panel. ‘Foul murderer!’

Frankenstein shrugged. It was an alternative term for soldier: not one he preferred, but it did sometimes fit.

Still under the elf-spell of sudden death, Foxglove and Lady Lovelace were waiting for him in the lobby. By the time he rejoined them his pistols was nowhere to be seen and he could bestow greetings upon the innkeeper like any normal guest.

‘But…,’ said Ada at last. ‘But…’

‘It was necessary,’ Julius replied. ‘They would have minced you…’

He let her chew on that technical term, prey to new doubts, whilst he secured transport.

Most conveniently, the black constabulary cab was waiting outside, left in sole charge of an ostler. His tip turned out to be verbal (‘go! Away!’) rather than coinage, backed up a sword-tip. It proved compelling and soon Foxglove was in the driver’s seat. Which was just as well, for the first ‘major outrage’ cries were coming from the inn, some of them out of an open window facing the street. Julius ushered Lady Lovelace into the cab.

‘Let’s try things my way for a while, shall we?’ he suggested, lending his words weight with a stolen catchphrase. ‘Do you think that might be worth a go? Hmmm?’

*** * ***

‘That was a tactical withdrawal,’ Frankenstein informed Lady Lovelace before they entered. ‘Now for a strategic one…’

She was chastened—or maybe in deep calculation—and said nothing. All the same, she went along with him.

After the previous kerfuffle at Baring’s Bank, Ada got the senior clerk straightaway, who had his speech rehearsed. Only this time Julius did the talking—always so more effective than shrieking.

He showed ‘his’ badge of office taken from the shot constable. Once that was accepted he handed over the pistol-punctured document.

‘A candle accident,’ he explained, when the brown rimmed hole was noted. The clerk’s eyebrow slowly descended.

‘As you’ll read, Milady has been taken into custody,’ Julius flowed on in fluid confidence. ‘Illegal revival, as I believe you wisely suspected before. Good man: you shall be commended. His Lordship would not have been pleased if funds had been released. Whereas now it is his strict instruction that a deposit be made.’

The senior clerk had not reached those giddy career heights without owning more than his fair share of caution. Banking depended on it. Therefore, he’d already sent one of his Lazaran accounting staff to check that a police vehicle was indeed parked outside. Which duly confirmed, further talk of deposits, rather than the always suspicion-arising contrary, lowered his shield still more.

The man spread his pale hands as if to receive the funds, or at least further explanation.

Julius delivered.

‘The jewellery, of course,’ he semi-whispered, as if Ada sitting beside him could not hear. ‘Family heirlooms. She’s dripping with them.’

‘Ah…,’ said Senior Clerk. It did fit. He’d heard tales of the fate of illegal Lazarans. Pig food apparently. Certainly, respect for personal property didn’t feature highly in any likely scenario.

Playing the game, Ada reached her even whiter hand to touch her string of pearls and jet necklet.

‘The Lovelace safe deposit box requires a combination,’ said Senior Clerk. ‘The Bank knows part, the client the rest. Will she co-operate?’

It was the fate of the Revived, even if present and listening in, to be spoken of as though not there.

‘Oh, I think so,’ replied Frankenstein. ‘I’ve had a word with her.’ He mimicked use of a whip.

Such lurid assurance clinched matters, in more ways than one. Plainly the man knew nothing outside of his service to Mammon. Those who’d ‘been around’ realised you could whip Lazarans until your arm ignited, without making much impression.

The way to the relevant vault lay through a weariness of gates, corridors and sentinels. Senior Clerk wafted through them all like a magician. Finally, in a little-frequented room of church-like stillness, he lit a lantern.

Locked boxes awaiting owners who might never come lined floor to ceiling. Both Ada and Senior Clerk knew which one to go to.

Concealing his actions behind a hunched shoulder, Senior Clerk twirled the dial three times and ways. Then Lady Lovelace completed the process, acting out the role of good little Lazaran. The door swung open—and Julius swung at Senior Clerk.

As a medical man Frankenstein knew there was a fine line between stunning and brain damage: but a pistol-butt is no precision instrument. He knelt and found the senseless Clerk’s neck pulse to check all was as well as could be expected in the circumstances. A gesture to himself mostly: it was too late to apologise if matters proved otherwise.

Meanwhile, Ada, never slow on the uptake, was taking inventory of the deposit box.

‘Bearer-bonds, high denomination banknotes, cut diamonds, share certificates: all good liquid stuff.’

Then Julius’ accomplice revealed herself to be in the very forefront of fashion. Lady Lovelace hitched up her skirts to show she wore those new-fangled ladies’ drawers. Into the spacious scarlet garment she stuffed stolen riches.

Frankenstein politely turned his back. Having forgot to bring a sack he thoroughly approved of her initiative, yet such shamelessness also unsettled him in ways he preferred not to explore.

‘You’ll have to take the gold coin,’ Ada ordered. ‘Too bulky for me to store in my nether garments…’

As soon as she was decent again, Julius went over and packed his pockets.

Ada awaited at the door. If she weren’t dead she might have had a bloom to her cheek. Even so, she still looked radiant; her eyes shone with excitement.

‘You know,’ she said, crooking her arm for him to link with it, ‘I might have been mistaken about you. You may escort me home, sir.’

Ever chivalrous, even to deceased ladies, Julius Frankenstein obliged.

* * *

Foxglove drove as though sedated, for on no account must they attract attention. Under the current ‘Total Security Government’ prowling police coaches were ten-a-penny but people who stole one needed to mimic their stately confidence. Doubtless, the word was out that a Black Maria was missing, but scrutiny would concentrate on those in a hurry. Therefore, Foxglove courteously gave way at junctions, whilst staring down those civilians who dared look.

Meanwhile, within, Frankenstein and Ada had discovered a new rapport. They were as bad as one another.

‘I must confess,’ she said, ‘the violence did rather shock one…’

Julius spread his hands.

‘Madam, if bridges are to be burnt, I see little point in being moderate with the matches.’

‘Perhaps so. I also lazily presumed you to be a stolid Switzer. Not to mention a mere scientist.’

‘‘Mere scientist’? queried Julius.

Ada turned on him in fury.

‘Idiot! I said not to mention mere scientists!’

Frankenstein had flinched away fearing a claw-attack before he realised she was joking. Lady Lovelace’s laugh had no pity.

So, that was how things stood between them! After restoring her to life, after shedding blood to save her from the mincer, even after conducting a bank raid to oblige her he remained just a hired help and figure of fun. Julius seethed.

‘Most amusing, madam. Highly droll. Yet I am surprised to hear you talk so. One thought you a devotee of science.’

‘I see it as a means to an end, herr doctor. However, its practitioners do tend to the tedious.’

‘Likewise the Swiss, I heard you imply.’

‘If so, you seem the exception to the rule.’

Julius smiled to himself.

‘Lady Lovelace, permit me to enlighten you: my countrymen may be likened to a well built bedlam. From the outside, all seems solid and safely gathered in; yet inside wild forces rage. It has been calculated that a million mercenary Swiss have served in the wars of Europe, and, I assure you, complaints are few. I myself have seen service with the army of the Holy Father, and the King of the Two Sicilies beside. War, revolution and rapine are normality to me. I have seen things that would make even your long locks stand aloft.’

It was Ada’s turn to smile enigmatically. ‘That’s all you know…’ was implied.

‘Do you doubt me?’ Julius asked, affronted.

Ada flicked her fan over a face which no longer felt heat or cold.

‘No, one does not. Doubtless you have stood up to your hocks in blood, on the battlefield and operating table alike. Though what you find to be proud of in that I do not for the… life of me know…’

There was just the hint of a stumble there, over her unfortunate choice of words. Lazarans generally learnt to purge ‘life’-related words from their vocabulary for fear of mockery. Lady Lovelace plunged on regardless with barely a pause.

‘My thoughts were instead of your presumption, herr doctor. Do you think me a mere stay-at-home lady of leisure? A woman who has seen and done nothing? Do you not know of my lineage and illustrious father? Let me assure you, Dr Frankenstein, I contain surprises for you yet!’

Julius stretched back in his seat, feeling fairly secure and shock-proof.

‘Surprise me then, madam…’

Ada looked at him, gimlet-eyed, her grey lips compressed to a slit.

‘I will. Take for example, those gems and jewellery you stole today: don’t try to pawn them.’

Contrary to his every wish and intention, Julius was startled. He sat upright. Those were a major part of their haul.

‘Why not?’ he asked.

‘Fake!’ replied Lady Lovelace triumphantly, like it was good news. ‘All fake!’

‘What?’

‘Glass and paste, I promise you.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me at the time?’

‘Surely, you should be asking, why did I? Have copies made, I mean.’

Frankenstein gritted his teeth, not nearly as rich as he thought himself a minute ago. They wouldn’t get so far now, or have so much first-class fun en route.

‘Go on then, madam; enlighten me: why did you?’

Ada was enjoying herself now. Just like her scandalous father she rather enjoyed shocking confessions.

‘Because the real ones are long gone—gone to pay my monstrous gambling debts!’

For the rest of the ride, Frankenstein brooded in silence and there things stood, at an impasse, a chasm yawning between the two travellers.

Not another word was said until Foxglove delivered them to Scotland Yard.

Chapter 6: DUCK ISLAND DISCUSSIONS

That too had been another of Frankenstein's bright ideas. Where better to leave a purloined police vehicle than among a throng of others? Word was out on the street but it might escape notice for ages buried amongst its brethren.

Foxglove parked at the end of a line of Marias outside constabulary headquarters. When nothing untoward happened he tapped the roof to say the coast was clear.

Still chagrined, not so much about the money but for being bested, Frankenstein didn't even offer to hand Ada down. His first failure in etiquette to the fairer sex since youth.

So Lady Lovelace sorted for herself. Whilst Foxglove tethered the horses as though they were his and always had been, she exited from the blind side, away from the station entrance. A shapely questing foot found the coach step and then the ground. Meanwhile, she smoothed down her dress—and rubbed Frankenstein up the wrong way.

In other words, still crowing.

'Am I such a disappointment to you, herr doctor? Dear me, I believe there is a word for young gentlemen who care only for a lady's financial attributes! I would not have suspected you of being such. You have the dashing looks, I'll grant, but persons of that… profession are usually far less starchy…'

This was neither the time or place. He and she could both be convicted of capital charges, and Foxglove, as their accomplice, was hardly in any happier position. Instead, Frankenstein cut her dead (that word again) and looked around for safe avenues of escape.

'This way, and give me your arm.'

He didn't really want the chill limb but Ada cheerfully complied. With bonnet lowered in maidenly modesty she might pass for a living, breathing, belle out for a promenade with her beaux.

As Big Ben sounded 'one' they walked briskly towards St James's Park, with Foxglove patrolling their perimeter, sniffing out pursuit.

Their ruse called for a modicum of small-talk, granted, but Ada was relentless: a wildcat in defeat and insufferable in victory.

‘Silly man: why else do you think I was so interested in Mr Babbage’s calculating machine?’

‘My indifference knows no bounds,’ answered Frankenstein, speaking through a false smile.

Ada expounded nevertheless.

‘People say Fortune or Fortuna is the goddess of gambling, but if so I am an atheist. No, I say that mathematics is the key that unlocks the treasury of gaming table or track! King Probability rules all. Now that sir, I believe with all my heart!’

‘Selling the family jewellery works too,’ Frankenstein added sourly. ‘I am told it greatly speeds one’s trajectory to debtors’ prison.’

Ada took it on the chin.

‘That also, good doctor. My once dear husband, Lord Lovelace, would have shot or divorced me had he known, but my researches were simply ravenous in their consumption of cash. Taking on the roulette wheel or the vagaries of the turf are not for the financially faint-hearted, I can assure you. However, the great project had to continue at all costs and so I liquidated the capital contained in my finery. A Hebrew in Hatton Gardens had replicas made.’

‘In that case, madam, I wonder that you’ve bothered to burden your britches with them.’

Julius blunted his barb by blushing again. Such tavern-talk was not his natural weaponry.

‘Do not let pique make you vulgar,’ Ada instructed. ‘You’ve been almost gentlemanly so far—for a foreigner and mercenary. Why spoil it? Also, have a care, for Foxglove does not take kindly to impudence in my presence.’

Hearing his name mentioned, if nothing more, the servant looked over from his orbital patrol. To Julius’ horror, Lady Lovelace waved back in precisely the way fugitives shouldn’t. Then she resumed.

‘If I had spurned such valuables, alone amongst all the pillaged items, it would have aroused suspicions and my ruse might have been exposed. But not only that, I keep them for a better day. Had not death and Mr Babbage’s… misfortune not intervened it was my firm intention to make good the deception one day. No one need ever have known.’

‘Save yourself,’ said Julius, ‘when wearing them; deceiving all who those admired their beauty.’

Lady Lovelace laughed, raising her white face dangerously high.

‘Oh, I know all manner of wicked secrets, Mr Swiss! You can hardly conceive… One more hardly makes any difference, does it. And are you still so very cross with me, mein herr? Can you not be just a little… mollified?’

Happily, the play on words sailed over Frankenstein’s head. He was not to know that ‘mollie’ was the low-English term for bachelors who had not met the right girl yet (and never would).

Even so, he quickened their pace and frowned.

‘Madam, I refer you to my earlier statement on indifference.’

Ada squeezed his arm, a disconcertingly marital gesture.

‘I don’t believe you, gold-digger doctor. But comfort yourself: the jewellery and all manner of other things shall be restored to how they should be. In due course, just as soon as I have conquered the deities of chance…’

They were passing by the lake and Duck Island, secure avian HQ in the centre of the metropolis. From it birds quested out to demand dinner from passers-by.

Fortunately for Julius and Ada there were a lot of the latter. Both place and hour provided perfect concealment in tidal flows of Westminster government workers taking lunch or otherwise about their business. The generation-long War had greatly inflated both their numbers and busy-ness.

Though excellent cover, Ada placed too much faith in it. She dilly-dallied and chit-chatted. The world was her oyster again and she was peckish.

‘Did you know,’ she enquired, indicating the tiny islet, ‘that on a whim and in his cups, King Charles II appointed a exiled French poet ‘military governor’ of Duck Island? Complete with handsome salary and title? I should have liked that post; and to confound the giver I would have taken it seriously, with tours of inspection and schemes of defence. That would have been most amusing, don’t you think?’

Julius knew she hadn’t been drinking, for he’d been with her all the time. Therefore this must be the madness of the British aristocracy he’d heard about—doubtless a function of inbreeding and lack of mental exercise. It would make a fascinating medical study for a student who gave a damn.

‘No,’ he said, ‘I don’t,’—and dragged her on.

Once past the island of Ada's obsession, Frankenstein headed for another concentration of cover. At the fringes of the park, where they wouldn't be in the way of their betters, a crowd of Revived clerks and menials were gathered round a street-preacher on a soapbox. Since the established church barred Lazarans from its places of worship they had to meet their spiritual needs as and when they could. In practice, this meant during those rare occasions when anyone deigned to address them and their masters didn't know where they were. Therefore the throng was avid, their yearning palpable.

And the preacher was fit to meet it: his eyes were as wild as his hair; his voice powered with passion.

'… Souls?' he was shouting, all the time looking round for the Park Police who'd inevitably move him on. Or arrest him. Or truncheon him. 'Of course you have souls! Let no man tell you otherwise: least of all the venal prelates of the lickspittle state church! 'Archbishop of Canterbury'? 'False shepherd of Babylon' more like! What does he know? Can mere Man burgle the Afterlife? Can the created steal from its Creator? Rubbish! Purchased dogma! Bought-and-paid-for Blasphemy! No: I tell you most solemnly: you all—all—have souls. Somewhere… in some inexpressible form known only to God…'

'Testify!' the recalled dead cried out, inspired by their own version of joy and urging him on. 'Testify!'

A smattering of living supporters present, eccentrics and/or idealists, approved more measuredly. Some bore banners. Julius saw one that read:

'ARE THEY NOT

AS WE

SHALL BE?'

A sort-of truth which only prompted him to think 'God forbid!,' and stunned all sympathy.

'Therefore,' the preacher continued, waving his arms, 'I assure you, dear brothers, dear sisters, that you are far more than cannon-fodder! Better than mere meat machines! You are alive again—and thus basking in Divine love—for better reasons than accountancy!'

That got a cheer. Some masters had no mercy and drafted their Lazarans into the drearier professions. Likewise the sad fields where their already cold hearts came in handy. Lawyers now employed more undead than living.

‘Wherefore, you deserve the dignity that comes with those Divine origins. Are ye latter-day Gibeonites: those whom Scripture says the Israelites enslaved to be forever ‘hewers of wood and drawers of water’? No, You are men: children of God and made in his image!’

Here was a weak point in his thesis, for many of those images gathered round him didn’t look very god-like. Rhetoric demanded he either get louder or more daring.

He did both. The Preacher looked about, even more haunted than before, and bellowed:

‘Nor are you beasts! Mere vermin to be hunted for perverse pleasure!’

This was pushing his luck. Lazaran blood-sports were forbidden (a waste of war material for a start) but everyone knew it went on. It was a melancholy fact that hardcore hunters found former-humans so much more challenging, more mettlesome and miles-for-your-money than a fox or deer. However, those who (allegedly) indulged tended to be both addicted and aristocratic: that is to say committed, well-connected, people averse to the limelight. The ‘Earl of This’ or ‘Lord That’ didn’t care for loose talk which might spoil the fun. There was even rumours of a Parliamentary Pack. It most certainly ‘didn’t do’ to go public about it.

And sure enough, soon afterwards someone must have ‘told’ on all the subversive talk. A constabulary whistle signalled suppression was on its way.

Which meant Frankenstein and friends must be likewise. They left the preacher and his assistants hurriedly packing up their portable pulpit.

‘Do not despair, brothers!’ the preacher roared as he worked. ‘We shall overcome! God will chastise Pharaoh and permit ye into the Promised Land! God shall feed His flock!’

‘With crumbs of comfort…’ thought Frankenstein dismissively, once they’d fled far enough. ‘Stale crumbs.’ Then he realised with a far from delicious shock that his family stood responsible for the terrible hunger they’d just witnessed. Hunger so gnawing that sufferers were willing to feed off crumbs from the Christian banquet they were barred from.

Julius was furious with himself for his lack of sensitivity (or something). What had he become? What still worse creature might he become given time? It was the Frankenstein family curse: first making monsters, then making monsters of themselves. That ancestral legacy followed him everywhere like a cloud; a big black cloud cancelling every holiday from care.

Anger (like all energy) cannot be destroyed, merely diverted. This particular fiery bolt ricocheted off towards Lady Lovelace. Julius permitted himself a scoff at Ada's expense, resuming their last serious exchange as though the Duck Island nonsense had never been.

'So, you plan—no, intend—to conquer the deities of chance, do you? 'Just as soon as' is it, madam? Really? And when might that be? And how?'

Anger aside, up till then they had remained arm-in-arm for cover's sake. Now Ada dared to disengage and turned to face him. Frankenstein 'ahemed' and gestured she should remember who—and what—she was.

To no avail. There Lady Lovelace stood, hands on scarlet silken hips, regarding him as though he were the king—nay, emperor—of idiots.

''When'?' she shot back. 'When? Well, when you've got me my spark back, of course.'

Chapter 7: DEAD MAN WALKING

‘Is there anything else you can tell me? The slightest scrap?’

France’s Minister of Police had aquatic eyes, cold and watery as a fish. They blinked behind their rimless glasses when no reply came.

A interrogator brandishing pliers stepped up but the Minster waved him away. That was not the best way with this prisoner: different dogs itched in different places.

The Minister cleared his throat: polite, almost apologetic, about his persistence in probing.

‘It is a matter of some import. Consider this: you are in no fit state to judge what is relevant or not. Moreover, this is a issue for consideration by someone imbued with civic virtue, someone with humanity’s best interests at heart: in short a citizen of the glorious French Republic—which you, of course, no longer are…’

Touché! The doomed man awoke from reverie and lifted his head. He looked up at the Minister through a curtain of matted hair.

‘There you are wrong, monsieur,’ he said, in gasps. ‘Wrong! No matter what your tribunal says, I shall be a citizen until my dying breath!’

He had been harshly treated, both before and after condemnation. His half-healed wound had re-opened, patterning his prison shirt with blood. Only the trial itself (a rushed five minute fiasco) had not presented opportunities for mental and physical violence against him. Now, contesting the verdict of the sacred State took what little reserves the prisoner had left. His chains barely shifted.

‘Alas,’ said the Minister, consulting his pocket watch, ‘that ‘breath’ you refer to is mere hours away. Meanwhile, I implore you to ponder, to review recent events: is there not some residual snippet? Some last service to render to the Republic?’

Actually, any such service would not be his absolute last. Not from some perspectives. The flow of bodies from Madame Guillotine was too bounteous to commit to the grave. In short order this man must rise again as a ‘New-Citizen’—or Lazaran as enemy nations disparaged them. With permanent semblance of a red ribbon round his neck, he would take his

place amongst myriad others, whether it be as a foot-soldier or undead ploughboy.

Let the Church and other reactionaries protest as they will, The Minister could not see anything wrong in it. Nature recycled all that it created, and the Convention sensibly emulated Nature. It was both virtuous and instructive that former enemies of the State might make good for their life's misdeeds in the only after-life the State believed in.

More thorough-going than his masters, Minister of Police Joseph Fouché believed in nothing: not a single thing. Through a varied past as priest, then politician, then revolutionary, terrorist, Bonapartist, Royalist and now servant of the Convention, no cobweb of belief had ever bound him. He loved his wife and children and thought that quite enough idealism for one lifetime.

Being blessed with such remarkable freedom of action proved the launch-pad of a glittering career. Fouché saw but didn't share the strings controlling those afflicted with 'values.' That enabled him to make them dance to his tune.

Like here, for instance. If this condemned wretch were not a believer, indeed, a fanatic, he would be beyond recall. The blade that would part him from life was being oiled for action even as they spoke. He had nothing left to lose and more torture would only spoil him as a spectacle for the Place de la Guillotine mob. So, in one—highly technical—sense he should be safe from harm.

Yet that same fanatic spirit which had made him suitable to be sent to England en mission meant he was still reachable. Though facing the just penalty for having failed, binding ties to an earthly cause meant use could be made of him yet.

The man was thinking. Not of matters more fitting to his predicament, but of ephemeral things, sole concerns of the world he was about to leave behind. Light returned to his eyes. Fouché leant low.

'There may be one thing…,' said the prisoner, dredging deep for one last reprise of his life-role as elite soldier of the State.

'Good, good…,' anticipated Fouché, taking out a dainty gold-clad notepad. He twisted its matching pencil till lead appeared and stood poised to record.

'It was when we were reconnoitring. A man-servant told me an alehouse tale. He was bitter; angry: loyal to an aristo family displaced from

their château. Yes! I recall: it seemed just black bile at the time, but not I'm not so sure. It was he who also gave me the drugged wine and dead-boys plot—and that all came true, didn't it…'

'Permit me to be the judge of that…,' Fouché whispered into his ear, scribbling away at the same time. He was more aroused than the marital bed ever made him.

The prisoner obediently trotted back from interpretation to reportage.

'This English lackey said the Arch-Traitor was distracted for days. 'Smooth as a plate, normally, but not no more': those were his actual words, I swear. He was a serf, a lickspittle of counter-revolution, and so I did not attach weight to his views. Was I at fault? 'Facts yes, opinion no': that is what we were taught at the *ecole privé*…'

The Republic-wide chain of state schools for France's teeming war orphans raised dependable but inflexible products: a combination that could be both strength and weakness. The Convention's best minds had wrestled with that conundrum in vain.

'Nevertheless,' Fouché hushed him, 'on this occasion, I should like to hear the vile wretch's opinion.'

The prisoner revisited recent days: from miraculous survival and escape, to return to inevitable death. He recounted from memory:

'The man overheard the Arch-Traitor talking to himself, when he believed himself alone.'

'And… and…?' Fouché's anticipation was almost erotic.

'I do not have the precise words, but apparently the Arch-Traitor said something to the effect that 'this was the plan that would make or break him.' Then the servant heard him pray—actually pray—for success—and then laugh!'

Fouché wrote it all down and then stood up straight. He exhaled deeply.

'You did not report this.'

'I was wounded and in a fever, Minister. Also, the debrief on my return was not… gentle. It seemed nothing; not even a tassel on the great tapestry of my other news.'

Fouché nodded understandingly.

'Just so. Is there more?'

'None, minister. You have everything.'

How true, how true. Joseph Fouché, Minister of Police, Duke of Otranto, Prince of Elyria, father of four, and now possessor of this priceless gem of intelligence, reflected that, yes, he did indeed have everything. The Convention, his nominal masters, hearing some of this, would be pleased with him. His real master (other than himself) would praise and possibly promote him. It was a lovely feeling. Too good for words.

Therefore, he wordlessly beckoned the Revolutionary Guards forward, and in silence signalled they should kill the prisoner now.

*** * ***

Two weeks before, back when the prisoner was still an agent and had a whole fortnight left to live, he was far away from that grim Parisian condemned cell. Likewise, though a frequent business visitor to the Nouvelle Bastille in the past, he was then merely aware of, but unacquainted with, its tears and stoicism soaked ‘special rooms’ where he’d be worked over and murdered.

Specifically, two weeks ago the Sun still shone on him and his blissful ignorance, whilst he hid in an hedge shielding the privacy of a mansion in England. Formal gardens were all around and a gravel drive beside him. In the middle distance the North Downs loomed, adding perspective to the pretensions of the house. Those chalk hills were here before it and would remain so after.

That thought pleased the waiting man. Injustice was not eternal. Also, he was gratified to have his fellow agents beside him, similarly concealed to the best of their elite abilities. He felt as reassured as a revolutionary cadre on active service reasonably could be in this very epicentre of black reaction.

If his brothers and sisters in arms didn’t know their orders by now they never would. Therefore the prisoner-to-be had nothing to say to them save exhortation.

‘Citizens,’ he whispered softly, but with fervour, ‘The spirit of History is watching: do not disappoint it. What is there to fear? Death is but an eternal sleep! *Vive la Republic!*’

Those with him, live and Revived alike, mouthed the salutation back.

‘*Vive la Republic!*’

It was the golden cliff-hanger spell between summer evening and summer dusk. Slap in the middle of that time when humble folk had meals to attend to in their own homes, but before the gentry answered invitations to dine. Only a few carriages hung around the main entrance, their drivers deep in chat or day-dreams. The mission enfilade had managed to worm their way close without detection.

Its captain, the prisoner-in-prospect, looked at the blue sky overarching him and all men. He knew for a fact there was no eternal eye watching: merely the moon, eight planets, a few thousand stars, and then space for infinity; all signifying nothing. Only the Republic had weight and reality. It was both the vanguard and epitome of mankind. What was one man's life compared to that? It was a privilege to have been raised to make sacrifice to it.

Here, at the likely end of things, he had found certainty. It felt like armour.

So, if not now, then when?

'*En avant!*' he hissed.

The doomed man emerged from the foliage and shot the guard before Loseley House's front entrance.

Chapter 8: A CRAVAT INTERRUPTED

'What is the description of the perfect minister for foreign affairs? A sort of instinct, always prompting him, should prevent him from compromising himself in any discussion. He must have the faculty of appearing open, while remaining impenetrable, of masking reserve with the manner of careless abandon; of showing talent even in the choice of his amusements. His conversation should be simple, varied, unexpected, always natural and sometimes naïve; in a word, he should never cease for an instant during the twenty-four hours to be a Minister for Foreign Affairs.

'Yet all these qualities, rare as they are, might not suffice, if good faith did not give them the guarantee which they almost always require. Here there is the one thing I must say, in order to destroy a widely spread prejudice: no, diplomacy is not a science of deceit and duplicity. If good faith is necessary anywhere it is above all in political transactions, for it is that which makes them firm and lasting. People have made the mistake of confusing reserve with deceit. Good faith never authorises deceit but it admits of reserve; and reserve has this peculiarity that it inspires confidence.'

From Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord's eulogy (delivered in absentia) for Baron Charles-Frédéric Reinhard (1761-1837), his immediate predecessor as Ministére des Affaires Étrangères (July to November 1799). Presented at the Conventionary Institute of France, March 3 1837

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Shooting? At this hour? What a bore!

The Prince de Beavente, Lord Vectis, Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Perigord, was disturbed during the second most important part of his day. Only the morning fitting of his silken cravat outranked having his hair dressed for dinner. How tiresome it was for this crucial moment—or hour—to be disrupted by gunfire! And in the sacred sanctum of his dressing room as well!

One member of the massed servantry legged it straightaway, off without a word and at speed through the far door connecting to the bedroom. Talleyrand pursed his lips in disapproval—no one need ever mention him again!

The balance stayed but were dismayed. Minor musketry they could live with (the local gentry were always murdering animals for sport), but this was developing into an early Guy Fawkes night. From beyond the now ajar door and not so far away, cries and angry men's voices were adding to the mix of single shots and massed volleys. There was nothing within either designed to provide comfort.

So, Talleyrand provided it. Aside from allowing them to turn him to face the fracas, he shifted not an inch, bolt upright in the ornate chair before the dressing table, still apparently awaiting the application of curling tongs and wig-powder.

'Some callers,' he said, quite unafraid, 'have no manners! I've half a mind to quite refuse to see them!'

A few laughed nervously. Others—the serious waverers—said nothing. Talleyrand laboured under no illusion (of any sort): the local labour bore no great love for him, for all his open-handedness and gentle yoke. They still bore a torch for their previous masters, the More family, turfed out after half a millennia of residency to make way for this foreign turncoat. Meanwhile, his French staff were just wig-combers and coat-brushers, the merest candyfloss of the human family. Not one would stand between him and an assassin's bullet.

Why should they? Talleyrand entirely understood and bore no grudge. They were material creatures, of limited duration, inhabiting a material world. Excess expectations of humanity only brought melancholy in its train. He would be the same in their position.

Nearer now, much nearer, came the sound of swordplay, of sparks being struck off sabres and metal applied to fragile fresh. Several more

servants melted away.

‘Come with me, sir,’ said the Prince’s senior cravat folder. ‘We may yet escape through the kitchens…’

He meant well but Talleyrand frowned at him. He had never, even in extreme youth, so lowered himself as to run, and didn’t intend to sample such dubious delights now. Quite apart from anything else, his club foot debarred him from having both haste and poise. Better death than even a moment without dignity.

‘A thousand pardons, highness…,’ said the flunky, remembering whom he addressed. Talleyrand graciously waved all remembrance of the faux pas away and remained sitting calmly to await Fate’s decree.

Loseley House had a garrison of guards—elements of the famed ‘Scots Guards,’ to be precise. Dark, dour, men with an distressing propensity for wearing colourful skirts. Loseley locals termed them the ‘poison dwarfs.’ Talleyrand, though a tolerant man, and never for a second doubting their professional skills, always requested they kept out of sight when his friends called.

Yet, despite the suddenness of this attack it was clear they were in plain view now. Interspersed with the sounds of combat could be heard their peculiar variant of the English language, expressing orders, protests at pain and some rather wince-worthy profanity.

Talleyrand tutted.

‘I can understand men wishing to kill one another,’ he observed to the company, ‘but surely there’s no need to be rude about it…’

The Prince also had two Home Office bodyguards allocated to him, though they chanced to be elsewhere when this present unpleasantness began. Talleyrand had every confidence they were now making best efforts to be with him, but he wouldn’t weep over their non-arrival. He suspected the grim duo had orders he should not fall into enemy hands alive. In the present context they were a decidedly two-edged weapon.

Likewise, the Loseley Estate and adjacent Littleton boasted a force of militia, as did every last hamlet in modern militarised Britain, but it was highly debatable they would influence events. For one thing, most would be scattered across fields and farms, far from the action. Secondly, it was necessary that they be willing to arrive. Foreign invasion was one thing, but saving a ‘furriner’ another.

Yet, in the distance the Prince heard St Francis' church bell begin to ring. So, now that the alarm had been raised some response might—indeed, could—be expected. The State required a return on those muskets provided gratis to every (trusted) homestead, and if no one in the locale stirred then questions would be raised. Conscription-for-life-if-you-answer-wrong sort of questions. Therefore, loyal Littleton would soon be on their way.

Too late. Beneath his unconcerned facade, Talleyrand's keen ear detected a silence in the lower house. The enemy had passed through there and prevailed. Now the maelstrom was up the main stairs and onto the landing. It appeared that the invaders had precise knowledge of where they wanted to go. The West Wing and Chapel, the expanse and charm of the Great Hall with its family portraits and stags' heads, tempted them not at all. They were an arrow travelling direct at a pre-selected target.

Footsteps thundered along the corridor leading to Talleyrand's boudoir. A Scottish voice rose above the clatter to roar 'fire!'

Following the storm heavy objects thumped the floor hard. A French voice in pain called for his mamam.

After the briefest of interludes a counter volley sounded. A bullet penetrated the bedroom door and ricocheted round to explore the room. Beyond, there were Caledonian howls.

Senior cravat-folder never learnt. He leant closer again.

'I have a gun, sir…,' and proof was shown in the form of an enamelled gambler's pistol of exquisite design.

''So I see,' said Talleyrand, though not actually deigning to look. 'Good boy…'

For a second there had been the implied offer that the Prince might actually take up the weapon! Talleyrand kindly let the awkward moment die in silence as if it had never been.

Comparative silence. The fighting was almost in the room beyond now, proxy revealed in every particular by a libretto of nasty noises. Hostile boots blundered in haste towards the sanctity of Talleyrand's bedroom. En route, firearms boomed in confined spaces and sharp steel screeched horribly together, ten times worse than chalk on a blackboard.

Actions have consequences—serious for some, judging by the sound effects. One life ended groaning at the bedroom's threshold before the door was slammed shut in the face of French imprecations. Then they heard

Talleyrand's four-poster bed (of so many, so much sweeter, memories) heaved across the floor to serve as barricade.

An impasse. Both sides re-evaluated their options in the light of recent developments.

Talleyrand sat up straighter still and smiled, hands at ease atop the silver top of his walking cane. However, like all the others with him, the unseen scene in the room beyond was vivid in his mind. Every sound was interpreted into instant pictures probably even worse than the reality.

Evidently, the attack on Loseley House was no impulse action. The invisible enemy had come well informed and equipped. Axes began hacking at the bedroom door.

Musket balls have little respect, even for hallowed oak; even less than axe-heads. 'Fire!' said the Guards officer in charge, and a volley ripped through the wooden panels.

The sound of an axe-head hitting the floor delighted most ears, but soon after the blade was taken up again, and reinforced by another. Simultaneously, French firearms replied through the splintered barrier. Talleyrand heard a Guardsman expire and greatly feared the body had fallen atop his beloved black silk sheets. Meanwhile, the wrenching of wood and hinges announced the death of the bedroom door. A babbling gaggle entered into the room beyond, shooting profusely. Grunting hand-to-hand conflict ensued. Or else they were mating.

Talleyrand was nearly alone now. In ones and twos his attendants deserted the scene via the back door. To the best of the Prince's knowledge that led to a servants' staircase and various obscure underling sorts of places. It had never crossed his mind to investigate before and he didn't intend to start now.

Only the core cravat team—his sartorial elite force—had lingered. He addressed them in farewell.

'Gentlemen,' (for such they'd proved themselves to be), 'I think you should go now. My guests are almost here.'

They gulped, they were pale, but they shook their heads.

Talleyrand sniffed in suppressed amazement. Who would have expected the most from the least? Life-lessons still kept on coming, even at its end.

'Well, then, bravo!' he said. 'But, if that is your considered decision, oblige me one last time. Am I presentable?'

They craned round, giving the rouged old man their full professional scrutiny. A minor adjustment to a lock there, a straightening of a cuff there, but nothing serious.

‘*Perfectment*!’ their captain cried and dashed two fingertips off his lips in tribute.

Prince Talleyrand was reconciled and awaited the inevitable.

Sight unseen, there were a few more shots and stabs, plus a few, quite excusable in the circumstances, extreme reactions to them. Then there was hush.

The Prince adopted a polite but non-committal smile.

The door handle turned. The door opened. A Frenchman strode in. He pointed a pistol straight at Talleyrand ‘s head. He pulled its trigger.

However, being preoccupied with dying because of the bayonet in his back, his departing mind quite forgot the weapon was already discharged. Its hammer sparked upon an empty pan and sparked only residual powder. A ‘flash in the pan’ as the English say.

Realising it was his last observation on earth, the would-be assassin moved on to whatever lies beyond, meanwhile folding gracefully to the floor.

Next in was a Guards officer, double-armed with red sword and cocked pistol. No friend of the effeminate (even those with the good excuse of being female), he observed the cameo before him with ill disguised distaste.

‘Right…,’ he said. ‘So…, how’s things wi’ ye?’

Talleyrand let his composed countenance answer for him. But one lace-fringed hand went so far as to wave gracious thanks.

‘Aye, well…,’ said the officer, and withdrew.

Prince Talleyrand sighed. A twisted corpse was paying homage at his feet. Gales of gunpowder perfumery offended his upturned nose. Worse still, he could imagine the ruin of his precious boudoir, site of his second most important remaining life ambitions.

‘England!’ he said sadly to the remaining faithful, ‘What can one say about it? My dears: the noise! The people!’

Chapter 9: THE COUNCIL OF BOX HILL

In after-times they came to call it ‘The Council of Box Hill’: the first time Ada’s awful ambitions were revealed in their full glory. In fact, it took place on nearby Betchworth Station but Ada preferred Box Hill—and what Ada preferred she tended to get.

Also, it was more of a monologue than a debate.

‘It must be so!’

Ada’s assertion cut the conversation’s throat. All contradiction was curtailed—because she said so. It was good enough for Foxglove: he wandered off along the platform.

Not so Doctor Frankenstein: his curiosity was pricked. Such certainty shouldn’t flow from all the cold water he’d been pouring. He turned to his travelling companion.

‘Why?’

Lady Lovelace looked to the hills—and beyond—for salvation. She obviously thought Julius was being slow.

‘Because I want it to be!’ she replied. And then realising that sounded too ‘spoilt brat’ out here in the big wide world (though the inmost conviction of her heart), hurriedly added. ‘And logic dictates it also.’

Frankenstein sighed and returned to repose on the station bench. He suddenly found the birds overhead fascinating. Unlike him, animals and mad-people had freedom, sweet freedom—and the great gift of understanding nothing.

They’d got off their most recent train when awareness of travelling without aim struck home. Just getting out of London had been objective enough in the first hours, but soon the little branch lines became samey and wearisome. They were comparatively safe now for a while: a little while. If there was pursuit it had been shaken off and their trail muddied by complexity. Time to take stock.

It was a nice day and place to do so: the sun shone bright on Betchworth, but all debate had been throttled at birth. Ada’s plans proved to be concrete.

Julius sighed again.

‘So you’ve recruited logic to your side too, have you? And to think I considered him my supporter. Pray tell how it was done…’

Ada knew when she was being humoured. She’d had a lot of that from Lord Lovelace.

‘It simply stands to reason. They would not have revived Bonaparte without a reason. The French Convention worships reason! But if there were no serum to fully revive him—not the feeble stuff you gave me, but spark and all—then there would be no cause to. No? But revived he was, therefore ipso-facto, such a serum exists…’

Julius would have tipped his hat to such a bedlam-fresh parade of ‘logic’ had he not been so tired. They’d barely rested all day. Even this uncomfortable iron seat on a station platform was siren-calling him to sleep.

‘Amazing…,’ he ‘replied.’

And it was really. Ada’s thought processes were amazing. The fact of their escape from London after one close shave too many was amazing. Their ‘success’ in reaching this sleepy Surrey station was… well, amazing—in a spectacularly unhelpful way.

The big question was, where to next? And then, just as important, why? Julius Frankenstein had the disquieting suspicion that, right beside him that very moment, Ada Lovelace’s insanity was assembling an answer to both.

Meanwhile, the scenery was enchanting: green hills spread before them shone, basking in the sun, and the few trippers who’d disembarked at Betchworth as they had, could now be seen as dots ascending the white ‘Zigzag’ path to Box Hill. Allegedly, a spectacular view over multiple counties awaited them. Further away, toiling along another approach to the same slope, cantered a hunt; matchstick figures resplendent in their ‘pinks,’ in pursuit of Mr Fox. Probably. Hopefully.

All very charming; all very English, but nothing to do with them. Back on the platform, there was no one about to bother about. After announcing that the next train anywhere wasn’t for an hour or more, the Stationmaster had taken himself and his suspicions about this trio off to some private citadel. Betchworth village was too tiny and remote to merit waiting cabs and so the ensuing space constituted solitude and interlude. Julius decided he might as well spend it exploring the delusions of a dead mad-woman.

‘You’ll surely concede,’ said Lady Lovelace, returning to the fray, ‘that he has been attended by success…’

Well, yes, Julius surely would. ‘He’ could only be ‘the Wolf of Europe,’ the revived Napoleon, dragged from the grave to win battles anew. Frankenstein considered ‘The Great Breakthrough,’ and ‘The Month of Marches,’ followed by ‘The Masterstroke of Mons’: epic victories to ten times over wipe away the shame of Waterloo. A time when every newspaper every day reported shattered armies streaming back whence they came, and thrones toppling. And since then other, equal, triumphs had been added. Recent rumours said that Prussia (what little was left of it) had been swept out of the anti-Conventionary alliance. Russia waited, trembling, next in line. The Grande Armée, living and otherwise, stood masters of the continent. But for neo-Nelson’s navy they’d be in England too! So no, Ada’s contention, as far as it went, could hardly be denied.

Of course, she had to drag it further, beyond all reasonable bounds.

‘Accordingly,’ said Ada, like she was administering a coup de grace to a fallen foe, ‘not only does this royal serum exist, but it clearly works!’

‘‘Royal serum’?’

‘My term: the invention of a second ago. It fits, n’est pas?’

Frankenstein quibbled for the sake of it.

‘He’s not Emperor this time round; not royal.’

Lady Lovelace brushed his pedantry aside with a sweep of her fan.

‘Give it time, mein herr, give it time…’

Likely so, but time was one resource the trio were short of. And sleep. And clean clothes. In fact, they must each have looked as wretched as Julius presently felt. One of the trippers from the train had been moved to pity and offered them a spare ham-sandwich and swig of ginger-ale. Frankenstein, for one, now secretly repented of spurning that charity. Out in darkest Surrey there was no question of a station buffet.

Meanwhile, though no mathematician such as Lady Lovelace, Julius was adding her two plus two to arrive at an alarming five—or more…

‘You want to go and borrow some, don’t you?’ he asked, resignedly. ‘To tap on Versailles Palace door and ask if Field Marshall Napoleon Bonaparte has any ‘royal serum’ he can spare…’

Ada admitted all with a smile. Though robbed of their living sparkle, her eyes were still lustrous; even beguiling. She turned them on Frankenstein and he could not turn away.

‘Borrow… steal… whichever,’ she said coquettishly.

With an effort, Frankenstein disengaged gazes.

‘Could you not consider somewhere nearer home?’ he said, mock grave. ‘Neo-Nelson is at Portsmouth I believe…’

Ada pondered the option for all of a second.

‘No. I think not. Does he have the spark? Doubtful. What has he achieved since revival? More mere victories such as he gained in life. Trafalgar, Yarmouth Harbour, the Battle of Botany Bay. Decisive victories, I grant you, but the same old stuff, much as before. Not a country-crusher amongst them. No, *mein herr*, I tip Old Boney as the sure-fire certainty if you ask me…’

Julius wasn’t sure he had, or if he had now wished he hadn’t. He sighed yet again and adjusted his collar. It felt over familiar, even grimy.

Yet he had no grounds for complaint, not really. What had she promised him? ‘Escape and adventure.’ Well, this proposal contained both those, beyond all arguing.

After all, what else was death but the ultimate escape and adventure?

Julius beamed at her—or something.

‘Very well, my dear Ada, France it is!’

She frowned at such familiarity but he’d already tipped his hat over his face and settled down to doze. Soon his breathing became shallow. Like many soldiers he had somewhere acquired the knack of seizing sleep in small packages, as and when required.

No longer needful of sleep, Lady Lovelace sat stiff-backed awaiting the next train, watching the colourful galloons, both civil and military, floating over Box Hill.

In her previous life, she and Lord Lovelace had their own private airship. The scarlet and gold dirigible was garaged in a private aerodrome at Horsley Towers, with stables for its Lazaran crew alongside. Husband and wife had been free to fly anywhere their hearts desired—instead of which Ada stuck to her calculations in confined spaces, and Lord Lovelace to politics in Parliament. Now it could have wafted her to France as easy as pie, if things were back as they once were…

But they weren’t. Ada put the possibility out of her mind, along with all related baggage. Awaiting mere public transport and the fourth class carriage that Lazarans were confined to, she felt no nostalgia for those pampered days. Mansions, family, fine meals and clothes, all such refinements of life sought to grip on a place Ada didn’t have, either pre or

post-mortem. All she missed was her spark, and that lack would shortly be attended to.

Lady Lovelace's dulled eyes ranged confidently across the living world, in anticipation of better days.

* * *

Toiling up the Zigzag path, Alfred Sturgeon clapped one hand to the back of his neck.

'Strewth!' he exclaimed to wife and ankle-biters. 'Someone's dancing on me grave!'

'Have a rest, Alfie love,' said Mrs Sturgeon, concerned. Foundry work took its toll and he wasn't the man he once was. This slog up a sheer hill on a hot day might well do their breadwinner a mischief. She proffered a bottle of lemon-cordial from her picnic bag.

'Here, 'ave a swig. It'll cool yer down.'

Mr Surgeon shook his head but accepted anyway.

'It's warming up I need. Blimey, Elsie: someone slid a ton of ice down me spine just then.'

He looked back in the perceived direction of the assault, but was none the wiser. All he could see was the tiny dot of someone on Betchworth Station staring up at him.

* * *

The only other people in the fifth (or 'Revived-person') class compartment were an obvious miser and some Welsh slate roofers, en route to some job somewhere far from home. Plus, of course, various Lazarans—but they didn't count.

Julius and Foxglove sat either side of Ada on the slat seats to show she was escorted, and the ticket collector had to mask his disdain. After ordering some refreshments brought through from the buffet car they were soon as comfortable as they were ever going to be in a cattle wagon. Along they went, sometimes in excess of thirty miles an hour, chugging away to the south coast.

Paradoxically, down amongst the lowest of the low was where you had greatest freedom of speech. Even if you crossed the bounds, who would believe anything that riffraff claimed to have overheard?

Frankenstein's natural curiosity had risen from the grave precisely parallel with Ada. Now, as they rolled through the Surrey countryside wreathed in steam, it was a convenient time to indulge it.

'Can you remember anything from being dead?'

The query was without preface or address but Lady Lovelace accepted delivery. After all, it was unlikely her companion was addressing the Lazaran chain-gang opposite: their low moaning, and indeed existence, had swiftly merged into the general background.

Foxglove frowned at such forwardness.

''No.' Ada's reply was considered but succinct.

It was a disappointment, though not unexpected. Frankenstein studied the smoke-dominated view from the window.

'No, none of you do. Or at least that is what your sort say. If true, it is a great pity: how one longs for a fore-glimpse of Paradise…' He paused and then reluctantly added, out of honesty: 'or premonition of Hell. Alas, we must conclude that the chasm between life and death is absolute, too wide to bridge or even glimpse the other side.'

Lady Lovelace dislodged a glowing smut from her bodice with a deft flick of the fan.

'There is an alternative explanation, mein herr'

'There is?'

Julius looked for it in vain. So Ada assisted.

'We may remember nothing because there is nothing. Have you not considered that, dear doctor?'

No, he hadn't. A sheltered Swiss upbringing, fortified by formative years in the Vatican, plus Frankenstein family guilt, evidently ruled such a hypothesis out of court. Julius was as shocked, shocked, as a maiden menaced by a drunken sailor.

'Apparently not…,' Her ladyship observed, and smiled, relishing her naughtiness' effect on him. Whatever else the grave did to Revived folk she was still her Father's daughter. 'Well, such is my conclusion. Personally, I draw great comfort from it…'

Fear of report-backs from the afterlife had fuelled the Church's earliest and most vociferous objections to Revivalist science. That none ever

arrived barely stilled the disquiet. The whole business had… implications—as now.

Ada Lovelace's irreligion left Julius aghast. Like beholding a blasted heath where you thought to find a garden. When the motion of the train caused their bodies to collide he perceived the chill from her dead flesh anew. Even Foxglove had to assume a stony face.

'Do not take offence,' the servant said to Frankenstein, (advice or command?) 'Her ladyship thought that way before.'

As if that made things better!

Julius calmed himself with deep breaths. He could not entirely quit the field without seeming unmanly, but the subject must be steered to safer shores.

'I respectfully decline to share in your delusion, madam,' he said. 'Although it does at least afford proof of one thing. Consistency with the former life only returns with the most refined serum. Likewise, memories of the former state. Most Lazarans awake to only a blank slate and vague sense of loss…'

Once she dug her dainty heels in, Lady Lovelace wouldn't budge a inch.

'How do you—or I, for that matter—know I have all my memories? There may be great swathes missing! How would I miss what I don't recall having?'

Foxglove stiffened at the horrible suggestion. He straightaway began silent work on a catechism of Lovelace minutiae, names of children and hounds, colours of curtains etc., to quiz his Mistress on later. Whatever she lacked, be it money or memory, it was his sacred duty to supply.

Frankenstein wasn't so easily reeled in.

'Concede, I implore you madam, that the serum supplied to you drew back full recollection as well as raw life. Accordingly, you were revived by the best serum available-'

'Almost the best,' snapped Ada, implacable in her new belief. 'We go to remedy your botched work!'

No one would ever have guessed from his face but in that instant Frankenstein was visited by revelation. It all suddenly struck home. This was real! He actually was heading for France and unbelievable danger on the say-so of a Lazaran!

Naturally, the next step was considering alternatives. Like getting off the train at the next stop and living out a long life somewhere. A safer life. A sleepier life.

It only took two seconds.

Julius Frankenstein smiled at Lady Lovelace.

‘Whatever you say…,’ he said.

Chapter 10: DEAD MAN STILL WALKING

Outside Loseley in the gathering night, yet-murkier-still in the shadows of the orangery, the condemned prisoner-to-be looked back and surveyed the ruin of his plans. Lights were going on all over the great house, illuminating the scene and ruling out further dark deeds. This rural idyll was now a riot of shouting and shots.

Because others had escaped like he had, and a vicious game of hide and seek was underway in the formal gardens. Occasional streaks of flame tore through the gloom as an attacker was found and fired upon, or the hunted despaired of flight and turned upon the chase.

Prisoner-to-be had seen the way things were going and so went the other way. Most survivors had taken the shortest and obvious route, towards sheltering trees. There they would be halfway to the ‘Hogs Back’ road atop the Downs where there might be traffic to hijack or blend in with. It was the obvious course to take.

Except that the enemy could see that just as clearly and seek with all his might to prevent it. Men on horses were racing ahead even now to cut them off. Later, expendable Lazaran beaters would sweep the woods whilst guns waited for whatever they flushed out.

Prisoner-to-be was cleverer. He hid himself in plain view.

The main drive to Loseley was broad and straight, and travellers upon it obvious. Lanterns being lit to either side made a passable imitation of daylight.

The French assassin embraced the light, walking in its fullest glare, scrunching the gravel as though he owned it. Locals rushing to the scene in arms and trepidation made way for him at first. After all, far more important than the pistol he carried, he had that air.

But there’s always one. When close to escape someone had the balls and/or stupidity to stop him.

In other circumstances, Prisoner-to-be welcomed the company of truculent rustics. Such men had revolutionary potential and might prove suitable recruits to one of the cells he’d set up. But now was neither time nor place.

‘Ere!’ said the burly yeoman in question. ‘Hold fast! Who might you be?’

His twelve-bore was halfway to raised and the suspicions of the gaggle with him were emboldened. This stranger might look and walk like authority personified, but it was no ordinary night. It might just be in order to probe.

Prisoner-to-be was not only fluent in English but had taken advanced idiom courses. He could be anyone from Duke to dustman; all of them impeccably English.

Tonight it was Duke.

‘Who I am is not your damned business. Nor relevant. Are you blind, sirrah? Can you not see there is an emergency?’

The Yeoman looked up at the disturbed ants nest that was Loseley and signified he could. Prisoner-to-be pressed home his point.

‘Well then, man, there is no time to waste with your idle curiosity. I serve the new Lord of Loseley. An attempt has been made, this very night, on his life: right under your inattentive noses!’

‘Now, see ‘ere!’ said the Yeoman, red-faced and flustered. ‘We ain’t full-time militia: we’ve got lives to lead and farms to attend to. I’ve come all the way from Binscombe, you know!’

‘Testify, Jacko!’ said some supporters. ‘You tell him!’

‘S’right!’ said another. ‘Even good ole Binscombe’s up in arms!’

From painstaking reconnaissance Prisoner-to-be knew Binscombe to be all of half a mile away—and a hamlet of infinite insignificance besides. He almost despaired, he really did. How could you ever have a revolution in a country where the natives were proud of self-forged chains? Their horizons barely got off the ground. Come the Convention’s inevitable invasion it might prove necessary to ‘slaughter and restock,’ and start again from scratch. Sad but necessary—and ‘necessary’ was always trumps.

Pending that glorious day, Prisoner-to-be needed to pretend willing slavery didn’t sicken him. He magnanimously conceded their point (whatever it was…)

‘Perhaps so: but you can be of vital assistance now. I am securing a perimeter but fighting is still underway on the Downs. The attackers have arrayed themselves in British military uniform; moreover they can even assume Scottish accents. Be on your guard or they will gun you down. My advice to you—no, command!—is to shoot on sight!’

It worked. Most knuckled their brows to him and rushed on to death by deception. Prisoner-to-be flowed through the mob like Moses parting the Red Sea. At the end of the drive the dark swallowed him up.

Behind him fresh firing began, initiating a whole new phase of festivities. It allowed Prisoner-to-be to ungrit his teeth and acknowledge his injury.

* * *

Prisoner-to-be hijacked a pony and trap, transferring ownership via a knife, and put miles between himself and his aborted mission. Then, after a spell of self-surgery and muffled screams, the offending bullet was extracted and he slept in a ditch.

On the plus side, rest permitted him to fight fever and infection. He made it through the night and awoke to a new day. On the other hand, he could no longer masquerade as an English aristocrat. Even the most eccentric of those did not come in a covered in mud and blood version.

* * *

Melchizedek Copper was a true shepherd of the Sussex Downs, like his father before him and his father before that—and so on back to just after the Flood for all he knew. His world encompassed the few miles round Lewes and that more than sufficed.

He had heard there was a war on with something or somewhere called France but he wasn't entirely clear what that signified. At any rate, it failed on impinge on lambing season and so couldn't be all that important.

What Melchizedek did know was that charity was the essence of Christian faith. His onerous duties didn't permit him to attend Divine service all that often but he well recalled one Easter-tide when the parson in his sermon had said 'faith without works is dead,' and even a shepherd could well see what was meant.

Therefore, Melchizedek modelled himself on 'the good shepherd' featured in 'The Good Book' that he himself couldn't read but still revered. And, though poor as poor can be, Melchizedek gave of what little he had

and was kind to those about him: to his family, to his two Lazaran under-shepherds, and even to the flocks in his care. It seemed to work: life in his tiny portion of Sussex was that bit less harsh because he was around.

So, it was only natural, when one day Melchizedek the shepherd saw a weary figure slogging its way up Windover Hill, all done with travel, that he should offer him shelter.

Unfortunately, it was a dead man walking on the Downs.

*** * ***

On his second night of flight Prisoner-to-be took over an isolated cottage, murdering its inhabitants down to the last sheepdog for the sake of a bath and change of clothes. It was a pity to kill mere shepherds and their families, who were workers after all; but History was a cruel mistress to those who served her, taking no account of individuals. Everyone knew that.

Once he'd cleared up, Prisoner-to-be consoled himself with the thought that there were plenty more where the deceased shepherd came from. The dictates of History would impel them to step up and fill the gap. Meanwhile, the humble lives sacrificed would, in their modest way, inch forward the glorious day, meaning they had not lived—or died—in vain. And, in any case, the cause of an agent in the field outweighed a shepherd's need for a natural span of years.

Tough measures for tough times. Even now, when far away from the scene of his original 'crime,' Prisoner-to-be would not have it easy. Far from it. True, there were pre-planned escape routes and agents in place, but by now the hue and cry would be truly up. The English Channel was well patrolled at the best of times, with Lord Nelson's flotillas criss-crossing like sharks, but even before them there were manifest dangers. England's face had been slapped whilst sitting in its own back-garden: all eyes would be extra-peeled, looking out for vengeance.

The now silent shepherd's cottage provided opportunity for reflection. After Prisoner-to-be had dressed his wound and driven the bothersome sheep over a cliff, there was silence in which to reflect on what had passed.

Theirs had been a brave try, founded on strictly rational thought. Mere assassination of the Arch-Traitor by wayside ambush or sniper's shot,

would not have sufficed. Outright attack in force passed the clearest message to all traitors in Reaction's employ—or it might have had it succeeded.

There is no safety from the Republic's displeasure, it would have demonstrated, no appeal against History's condemnation! No distance, no guards, no snuggling deep into a tyrant's bosom was protection enough. The Republic struck when and where and how it wanted, and not via some furtive assassin's blow but with style! Massed infantry attack deep in the black heart of the enemy! Loseley was to have burned and Talleyrand with it.

But it and he hadn't. So that was that. No good crying over spilt milk or unspilt blood. Prisoner-to-be still had one more duty to fulfil.

He had faith, of the strictly secular kind. He knew he would make it home, somehow. He would report to the Republic. He would demand his due punishment for failure.

*** * ***

If a wounded French agent could extricate himself from England the same should have been child's play for Julius and Ada, who had their health (if not life, in one case), plus funds, plus every right to be in the country.

Not so. At the exact moment said Frenchman was murdering Melchizedek the shepherd's family on the Downs above them, down in Lewes town beside the River Ouse the couple were being rudely rebuffed.

'N-K-D,' said the quaymaster, and made to turn away. Julius' hand on his shoulder restrained him—and earned a black look.

'Explain yourself, sir!' Julius cried. 'I demand a degree of courtesy!'

The quaymaster reached up and politely but firmly disengaged the delaying hand. There were scowling dockhands and mariners around who looked willing to give him support.

'I'll explain, but I'll not alter, mister furriner—and I'll thank you to keep your paws to yourself. N-K-D I said and say again: 'tis local dialect for 'no-can-do': our little rustic joke, only it ain't no joke. No one here will take you, not for love nor money.'

'But why not, man?' said Frankenstein. 'We can afford to be lavish, nor shall we haggle.'

Quaymaster's expression indicated he never doubted it.

'Nor shall I, mister. Neither shall I be druv—as we say here in Sussex'

Julius looked to Ada for interpretation. She supplied, purse lipped.

'The motto of the county, mein herr.' She adopted a rustic accent: ''We wunt be druv.' In plain English, they sometimes oblige but cannot be forced.'

'Just so, ladyship,' confirmed Quaymaster. 'And there's an end to it.'

'But in the name of God why not?' cried Frankenstein, throwing up his arms. 'You have craft galore: why cannot we be conveyed to the coast?'

Quaymaster was amused. Lady Lovelace sniffed, even though she now had no need for breath. The man knew.

'But it don't stop there, does it, mister?' he said. 'I misdoubt your path ends at Newhaven and England's shore…'

He had them there, though naturally Julius couldn't admit it. Quaymaster pressed his advantage in the intervening silence.

'I dare say you might get one of the gentlemen to take you…'

'He means smugglers,' interjected Ada helpfully.

'…but we're law-abiders here. And besides, Lewes is a pious Protestant place. I don't speak for all, but many don't hold with all this … reviving business.'

He looked at Lady Lovelace with frank distaste. Foxglove bristled.

'We load occasional Lazaran regiments for the war,' said the master of this little world, 'out of duty and love of country. But shipping deaders abroad without a licence? Oh no, matey, that's a hanging offence!'

*** * ***

It was the same story in Rye when they got there, via many tedious short journeys and changes of train. At the Mermaid Inn, whilst Ada waited in the rain outside, Julius enquired after local vessels plying for hire. Subtle questions (or so he deluded himself) ascertained which of their masters were the liveliest lads.

Passing by the port's gallows en route to the harbour should have prepared them for disappointment. There, strung up and rotting, were all those free traders who'd run foul of the coastal blockade squadron. Their former colleagues passed by them twice a day—a salutary lesson.

Rye mariners weren't so restrained as those of Lewes. After their first 'no' to Frankenstein wasn't heeded, they threw fishheads.

Lady Lovelace had to bear-hug Julius in an icy embrace to keep his pistol in his pocket.

* * *

They struck lucky on their way back along the coast. Though first impressions suggested quite the contrary. Life served them up a lemon, only for it to spontaneously turn into lemonade.

A militia-constable boarded the train at Cooden Beach and started checking tickets, so they were obliged to disembark at the next stop, far earlier than intended. However, that 'choice' of station might have been their downfall just as effectively as surrendering themselves. 'Norman's Bay Halt' was the epitome of insignificance set in a sea of desolation. Anyone alighting there merited a curious glance.

Julius and Ada got them aplenty but, as luck would have it, not from the constable. An incautious flash of ankle meant he was all agog at a jaunty young lady passenger at the time. Then the loco chugged away and he never knew about the certain promotion just missed.

Which meant he retired, decades later, still a constable, rather than the Inspector that might have been. Taking the long view from then, he would have said the glimpse of stocking was good, as far as it went (½ inch up the calve), but all in all wasn't fair exchange. But he didn't know and so didn't say so, and remained content as he was. Thus things worked out well for everyone.

Back at Norman's Bay, the pancake flat Pevensey Levels spread from the distant Downs right to the pebbly beach, and the wind swept over all. It spoke of rain soon. Only a few cottages, doubtless the abode of sluice-keepers and the like, relieved the uniformly grey scene.

'Please tell me,' said Ada, 'I beseech you, that this is the low point in our adventure…'

Frankenstein looked all around again, as if he couldn't trust first impressions. Finding nothing for his comfort, he tried to light a cheroot but the lucifer wouldn't flare. He flung both away, losing both smoke and dignity.

‘I can only observe,’ he said, ‘that here is indeed low, madam. In fact, positively sea-level. Therefore, it is difficult to conceive of deeper depths, but one cannot rule it out. As I found out in the Heathrow Hecatomb, Fate sometimes drives our fortunes positively subterranean…’

Lady Lovelace slumped down onto the suitcase Foxglove carried for her.

‘In which case,’ she sighed, ‘I propose to throw myself under the next train to arrive.’

Foxglove prematurely stepped between Ada and the platform’s edge, although the track was visibly empty for miles either way.

Her proposal would do the trick. If anything, Lazarans were even more delicate than living humans, and disturbance of the serum sustaining their frames invariably did for them. The mangling attentions of a train’s iron wheels would certainly put Lady Lovelace beyond reviving as an entity, leaving just loose limbs fit only for spare parts. A dreadful waste of Frankenstein’s hard work…

He decided to risk a second cheroot and this one took.

‘Even if sincere,’ he commented, puffing away, ‘your proposal may be long delayed, madam. This hardly seems the busiest of lines: your despair must stew awhile…’

Inadvertent mention of food reminded them they were hungry. Simultaneously, the rain arrived.

‘Perhaps,’ said Foxglove, keen to get his mistress away from the rails, ‘we should seek shelter nearby. And eat something. And then think about things.’

‘‘Things’?’ said Lady Lovelace bitterly. ‘Don’t talk to me about things!’

But she arose and went with them into the days to come.

*** * ***

To their pleasant surprise, two of the low cottages transpired to be joined-into-one—and an inn besides! ‘The Star of Bethlehem,’ no less. Though a mystery how it found custom out here in the back of beyond, the gift-horse’s mouth was not inspected. It meant there was no need to share a fisher-family’s limited hospitality.

Even so, there might still have been problems. Regardless of former status, Lazarans were—at best—only tolerated in public houses, and then only in the public bar, or that portion of it designated for day-labourers, gypsies and sundry hoi polloi. There the undead formed a reassuring bottom-of-Life's-barrel for even them to feel superior to. Ada and Foxglove wouldn't have enjoyed that.

Fortunately, the Star was so far flung it only had the one bar—a sort of rough Sussex equality. There they found funny looks galore but also, compared to the cold and rain outside, a welcome, and warmth, and food for sale. And, as it turned out, not only food.

Whilst the landlord went off to assemble their 'luncheon' (which got laughs), one of his customers peeled away from the bar huddle and came over, drink in hand. He looked capable of anything: a gnarled tree-trunk of a mariner with wind-reddened face and wind-slitted eyes. Yet they probably appeared as exotic to him as he to them.

'Come for the whale, ave ye?' he asked, without preamble. The lower classes were meant to preface unsolicited conversation with 'excuse me saying's and 'might I make so bold's…

'No. We've ordered lamb cutlets,' replied Foxglove, who was prickly on points of etiquette.

The mariner smiled but remained. Frankenstein's curiosity got the better of him.

'What whale?'

'Only you've missed he,' the mariner went on. 'The big ole stranded whale what trippers came to see, that the Railway company put the halt in for, he clean rotted away two year back. And good riddance: all pong and no eating.'

'Don't you have a go at old whaley!' said the landlord, returning with a tray of brandies. 'He were good business while he lasted. And put us on the map too, with a new name.'

'The Railway company didn't much fancy 'Pevensey Sluice,'' the mariner explained. 'Normans Bay sounded much sweeter to they…'

'Really?' Frankenstein delivered the variant of that wonderfully multi-purpose English word which implied he didn't give a damn. 'No, not here for the whale,' he then confirmed, and left it at that.

The visitors downed their drinks and when the spirits reached their spirits they felt revived enough to converse—amongst themselves.

‘Are you still here?’ Foxglove asked the mariner. Somehow, by tone alone, it was conveyed he’d happily make it otherwise.

The mariner ignored words and intonation alike. He focused on the gentry.

‘So,’ he said, softly, ‘if ain’t the whale of blessed memory, then you must be for France…’

That got their attention.

‘What on earth do you mean?’ asked Ada, taking command in full aristo mode.

The mariner cut her dead, or as good as. His gaze remained on Julius.

‘Not ‘earth’: I’m talking sea. Earth’s where this here deader belongs. Sea is how you’s trying to escape: is why you’s here in Normans Bay. Now Mr Whale’s gone there ain’t no other reason.’

Frankenstein installed a finger erect before Lady Lovelace’s opening jaw. Slowly she closed it again, in order to bite her tongue.

Julius spoke quietly, though he now suspected it little mattered in this place. The mystery of the Star’s location was solved: it lived and thrived on illicit trade, born of being in prime position for it.

‘That,’ he said, ‘is loose talk. Your country is at war with France: all contacts with it are capital crimes…’

The mariner smiled. The exercise screwed his eyes up still more till they were mere beads of light.

‘If we weren’t in mixed company,’ he answered, ‘I’d have this shirt off and show you my back. Red and ridged as bacon! Twelve years in his Majesty’s navy flogged all the patriotism out of I! Now are you France bound or not? Are we in business?’

They were. They certainly were.

*** * ***

Since it was cold and dull upon the beach at midnight, they made conversation. It is unlikely Lady Lovelace would have exerted herself otherwise.

The only alternative sound around, save the sea, was moaning from Lazaran gangs working sluice gates out on the Levels. Not that cold, wet and dark signified anything to them: it was merely their response to being

ripped from eternal rest. Owners had to accept that perpetual lamentation was a feature of the low-grade Lazaran. Even muzzles and beatings only reduced it to a hum.

Accordingly, almost anything was an improvement on that distant but depressing dirge.

‘Have you ever played rounders, mein herr?’

She persisted in calling him that, for reasons all her own. Julius speculated that she wished to emphasise his foreignness, the better to stress her own belonging here. Nationality might be all Lady Ada Lovelace (deceased) had left. In the modern world to be born (or even re-born) English was to have done well in the lottery of life.

Frankenstein skimmed a flat pebble at the waves. It sank like… a stone.

‘Rounders?’ he said. ‘It is a card game, no?’

‘No,’ Ada replied. ‘It involves a bat and ball and running between four stations. One played it as a girl, but that is not material. One only mentions it because the sport employs an apposite phrase: ‘Three strikes and you’re out.’ I strongly believe that applies to us.’

Frankenstein yawned. It was a bore to feign interest but their rendezvous was late.

‘How so?’

‘In that by time of our third request for conveyance, first Lewes then Rye, the news will have spread to every fisherman’s ‘spit n’ lean’ hut and foreshore in the south—for theirs is an incestuous world, bound into brotherhood by adversity and risk. Our concerns would be the subject of promiscuous discussion and, soon after, public knowledge.’

‘Really?’ That word again, this time expressing surprise.

Lady Lovelace nodded.

‘Really. As I say, on the third occasion of asking is my calculation,’ she confirmed.

‘I defer to you in the matter of calculations…,’ said Julius, unbelieving.

A distant splash and howl signalled that a Lazaran must have fallen into one of the deep drainage ‘guts.’ It was not as great an emergency as it might be, for one of the few benefits of revived life was lack of need for air. Shipwrecked Lazarans had been known to survive in the water for months, only finally coming to grief via rocks or sharks. In the past, escaping

Lazaran slaves had dashed into the sea and, for all anyone knew of it, lived and failed to breathe under the waves still.

It was an enviable quality to possess—possibly their only enviable quality—when about to embark on a hazardous voyage. It merited mentioning to Lady Lovelace, if only to cheer her up.

‘Has it not occurred to you, madam, that you might safely walk to France?’

Obviously not. Ada grimaced and indicated her scarlet gown and just-so coiffure. Despite the premature streaks of grey she was proud and protective of her crowning glory.

Julius persisted.

‘I meant if you were not such a lady, if your appearance upon arrival was no consideration? In reality you have no need of a vessel as we do.’ He turned jocular. ‘Consider further, my lady: we mere living creatures are holding you back!’

Ada nodded and turned to look at him, deadly serious.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Now that I had considered. Often.’

Frankenstein suddenly felt a chill even deeper than the night’s. He’d just glimpsed a future master species different from his own.

‘All aboard!’ came a shout from seawards.

Chapter 11: A VISION OF VECTIS

Maybe it was his title that made Talleyrand think of the Isle of Wight. ‘Lord Vectis’: after the classical name for the place. The Prime Minister’s erudite little joke to match making him Island Governor too.

Well, let the great man and his cabinet laugh. If they crowned him King of Duck Island in St James’s Park, as per Ada’s fantasy, he’d take that seriously too. As ever, Talleyrand ate what was set before him and made the most of it. Made a relished meal of it, in fact. It was only who had the last laugh that mattered.

Talleyrand had never visited Wight and probably never would. However, full of good intentions now that he was solely responsible for a concrete somewhere, he’d carefully appointed a civilised man as manager. Someone thoughtful and a stranger to passion. Also someone who, as compensation for all the prodding and probing involved in getting the job, would be hugely rewarded for his troubles. Or, alas, punished likewise. Linked to that lavish salary was a clause spelling out that the penalty for corruption—even a shilling’s worth of corruption—was death. Labour laws in contemporary England had got to the stage where such contracts were commonplace—and quite legal. Many factories had their own gallows (to save time and bothering the State).

Talleyrand’s first assigned task for him (bar the prescribed sexual purgative each morning) was to rid the Isle of soldiers and other tax-eaters. They could remain in the fortresses central Government felt necessary, but nowhere else. In a well-run polity shepherdesses should be able to roam unmolested, and hard-working people work hard without robbery.

Then the Prince scoured all democracy from the Island whilst simultaneously inflating an illusion of it. Any number of ‘consultative councils’ and councillors were created: but with no real power but to feast and talk and keep themselves out of mischief. For Talleyrand did not just fear ‘crude and licentious’ soldiery and busy-body bureaucrats: he knew from personal experience that humans had to be protected from the political class no less than they were from pirates.

Of course, some social-cannibals are not susceptible to reason and, like foxes, do what they do driven on by urges. No blame therefore attaches: but

neither is there point in appealing to their better natures. Lawyers were warned once about their behaviour and second time shot. There were limits even to Talleyrand's tolerance.

Whilst still intact their bodies then hung in cages on the walls of Yarmouth and Cowes Castles. Thus, all arrivals to Wight were met with visible demonstration of its enlightened penal system. Swift, cheap, Justice, with a moral, and a 100% record of reform.

After that it was merely a matter of setting up first-rate free schools (bilingual, naturally) and then 'Lord Vectis' work was done. He and his manager could sit back and let things roll, relying on human nature. Just a century or so should see peace and prosperity become their default setting.

Because, in a perverse way, the Prince had a benign view of humanity (setting aside, of course, its obvious innate depravity). He had long observed that, left in peace and protected from bullies, the invincible trajectory of man was to prosper. Restrained from war and preying on one another, they couldn't help themselves but build things: useful things like houses and businesses and families. And then they tended them like a garden, finally handing on the baton to loved ones or relatives before laying down to eternal rest, fairly satisfied. Or else drank themselves to death early.

It wasn't glorious or noble, there was little drama and no poetry; and Talleyrand had no wish to join in himself, let alone, God forbid, socialise with such people. But he was convinced that this was what they really wanted—and, who knows: perhaps what the Almighty wanted too?

If there was one thing the Prince de Beavente, Lord Vectis, Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Perigord was above all, it was polite. And it was surely polite to give people (and deities) what they wanted. Where possible. If he felt like it.

Word was that tax yield was now way up. People were moving there from elsewhere and native smugglers going straight, finding better, more relaxing, ways to make a living. All good signs. Soon there'd be agitation for a mainland link and Solent bridge—though he'd veto that: let Shangri-la remain its sweet self and require a little effort to get to…

Meanwhile, goodness knew what his manager did all day, sitting there in Carisbrooke Castle; twiddling his thumbs or playing with himself probably: but Talleyrand wished him well. He recalled from one interview (the fourth, or was it fifth?) the man saying he liked to read History. Well,

thanks to Talleyrandian rule there were now free libraries on the Island that he could read his way through and grow even wiser (if not happier).

So, everything should have been fine and civilised and yet here Talleyrand was apparently visiting the place one morning, contrary to all intentions, and finding things—everything—gone so very wrong. Just as there was no sign of his manager anywhere there was excess signs of soldiers everywhere.

They straggled all over the place, discipline as eroded as their uniforms. And even civilians were in arms, brandishing weapons and acting like drunkards. And at this time of day too! Some of them looked like death-warmed-up. In fact, on closer inspection, they were.

Talleyrand couldn't recall arriving (which was strange), or even what type of craft he'd sailed in. Presumably his secretary had arranged things. But then surely they would also have arranged for his reception. And not by a yelling rabble either. Yet all he could see through the strands of morning mist were men running hither and thither, all rudely ignoring him. It was worse than a Greek fire-drill!

There were the sounds of gunshots also, something Talleyrand deplored. When he'd ran Napoleon's empire for him there'd been perpetual musketry the length and breadth of Europe, despite all his best efforts and advice. And look how that had ended up!

He was in Yarmouth, Talleyrand felt fairly sure. Though not blessed with personal acquaintance, he'd heard that its castle was of the squat modern sort rather than picturesque and ruined kind. And here beside him reared a boring wall of the type you'd imagine. It had the royal coat of arms (Henry VIII's, if Lord Vectis read correctly) above its gate but was otherwise unadorned: a pared-down weapon of unwelcome. He'd read that the fabric incorporated stone from Quarr Abbey, suppressed during that King's 'Reformation.' Surveying the result as an aesthete, if nothing more, Talleyrand considered it a very poor exchange.

And what was this? Canon fire from the Castle's portals? That wasn't meant to happen! And certainly not in his model state. What a state of affairs! How extraordinary.

Talleyrand went to investigate. A dozen paces on he discovered Lazarans hurling themselves at the fortification, only to be blown back (and apart) by grapeshot. The consequent gore and gunpowder residue threatened his cravat. Naturally he retreated.

A siege? By unruly undead? Everything had gone to pot he concluded.

And had it confirmed for him by meeting one in Yarmouth High Street. A great cauldron, perhaps pillaged from an inn, bubbled away atop a fire made of furniture. Into it the undead fed bits of people. The suspiciously long limbs protruding from it were instantly identified. In an adjoining alley Talleyrand now saw a pen of human prisoners, either resigned or wailing, being one by one converted into portions by Lazaran butchers armed with cleavers.

He'd always heard that rogue Lazarans consumed their victims whole and live: no gourmands they! Yet these seemed a higher sort (the Jane Austens of their species perhaps) who demanded daintier rations. Or perhaps it was a refinement of revenge.

Naturally, Lord Vectis recoiled—straight into the arms of one of his surviving subjects (apparently an endangered species…).

'Save yourself! Save yourself!' said the man, gripped by strong emotions and delayed in the act of fleeing. 'All is lost!'

'No, sir!' replied Talleyrand, and went so very far as to reprimand him with his walking cane. One, two; light mock-knighting blows to each shoulder. 'No, I say. You save yourself—from shameful abandon!'

He drew the man to him by a handy chain draped about his neck. Then they were temporarily alone and out of the action, secluded in a shop doorway. All the shop windows were shattered, its display of lady's-wear dishonoured.

The man rallied slightly. He looked at Talleyrand but did not really see.

'They came out of the waves at Freshwater,' he said—or babbled. 'While we were clinging on at Totland! All is lost!'

Well, plainly he was, but, although a fabulously wealthy man, Talleyrand could not afford to join him. Panic was the most expensive of luxuries. Cathartic, possibly: but ruinously expensive. There would be time enough for panic in the grave (where it had the habit of putting you).

'How can all be lost?' he asked the man whilst he still had him. 'This is just the Isle of Wight…'

'Man's last stand!' said the man. 'The end of England!' And he wept. And fled. Leaving behind in Talleyrand's hands his mayoral chain of office.

And then Lord Vectis was suddenly elsewhere (which was strange), oddly unclear about travelling between the two places. He now stood below verdant green downs. The village sign said 'Brighstone.'

Its cottages were afire and there was that confounded pop pop pop of small-arms fire again. Oh, how he detested it!

Fortunately, the vile sound proved to be short-lived. Less happily, it derived from last gasps and mopping-up operations. Lazarans were in charge now. They strode the streets like masters and directed how things should be for the superseded species.

He observed prisoners being corralled in the main street and edged utensils being sharpened. He watched a Lazaran leader drag a respectable matron by a halter round her neck, screaming towards the village church. Perhaps she was his prize and treat. Talleyrand did not envy anybody here their fate.

The matron saw him. ‘Help!’ she called out as a change from shrieking, arms outstretched, clutching at fence posts and straws as the darkness of the church interior drew near. ‘Help me, sir, I beg you!’

Talleyrand bowed to her.

‘Never fear, madam,’ he said, at maximum dip. ‘I shall.’

And the fact that he stood by as she was ravished and eaten didn’t alter that resolve one bit.

Then Talleyrand woke up. Then he sat up. That portion of his silk sheets nearest his hands had been shredded. All of them were sweat-soaked (no mean feat for a diminutive man)

Well!

It was not nice: he’d go so far as to say (the strongest condemnation in his armoury) it really was appalling. Men of his vintage and calibre did not deserve to be appalled. It would not do and up with it he would not put.

Till then he’d had an mild preference for one side and policy. He’d dabbled here and directed there as mood took and opportunism offered. His core was not engaged (naturally). But now he sensed a need for commitment: urgency even!

Which was not like him at all. So perhaps he was being directed in his turn. But it was no angel that had shown what he’d seen. Nor would Jehovah send one of his famous ‘dreams’ to such as he. Would He? Surely not!

Though not so fast! Technically Talleyrand was still a Bishop. He’d left the business, true, and been excommunicated to boot, but in one sense the brand remained on him and always would. ‘A priest for life’ they’d

intoned at his ordination ceremony all those years ago (though he'd been distracted by a piquant chorister at the time). So just maybe…?

Talleyrand had always taken it as a point of honour to examine all evidence in the problems Life presented him: no matter how disquieting some evidence might be. Braving disquiet and damage to the soul was the courage he'd shown in preference to scampering round a battlefield at someone's else's behest. Valour in the service of self and commonsense had always struck him as the far better part of… well, valour. Ditto not intercepting speeding lumps of metal.

Whatever the source, he now felt called to a decision. One of the big ones in his life, not like 'Napoleon or the restored Bourbons?,' or 'loyalty to France or dealings with the enemy? No, this ranked alongside choosing a cover story for his club-foot (a childhood injury and neglectful nurse = sympathy), or appointing his chef (the all-rounder Carême or potato sorceress—but mad harpy—Madame Mérigot?)

Talleyrand could not find it in himself to love his species—even he was not capable of that level of deceit—but by and large he wished it well. For what was the alternative: the rule of trees and lichen? Or insects? Or Lazarans? It would be peaceful, granted, but not interesting.

Talleyrand preferred interesting and so plumped for that future. Regardless of any inconvenience to himself (within reason), he would make it so.

But not today, because today he was playing whist with some witty fillies. Therefore tomorrow. Or shortly. But certainly soon. Probably.

Chapter 12: LIP SERVICE

Talleyrand's habitual rising at midday threatened to drive Sir Percy Blakeney mad. There were things to do and plans to make but his second-in-command (so he deluded himself) never appeared till the day was nigh done! As if managing all England's Intelligence Services could be a part-time post!

But because the man (or devil) had his uses, Sir Percy tried delaying his arrival as long as he could bear: meeting the Prince half way, so to speak. However, that compromise involved agony. As a lifetime early riser, and increasingly aware his best moments were now confined to morning, the lost hours scraped Sir Percy's soul as they slipped by. Therefore there was many the time that he stomped Loseley's formal gardens in murderous impatience, not seeing God's glorious creation but an ever darkening red mist instead.

God's Teeth and toes! What in the Almighty's name did the Frenchman have to do in that damned bedroom anyway? Sir Percy was aware of Talleyrand's ludicrous ritual of the cravat, and that he played cards till all hours, but the old fool was so advanced in years he stood in less need of sleep, surely. Blakeney got by on five hours a night or less, and it was a filthy lie to say his volcanic temper had anything to do with that! He'd sacked any number of clerks and servants who so much as hinted at it. Other people were entirely to blame. Like now.

And as for the thought that the Frog might still do the mattress dance, or even display interest in trying… At his age? Disgusting!

Today, after the fifth furious message, Talleyrand finally emerged as the clocks struck one. He looked poised and faultless. You could have sliced bread on the creases of his cravat.

Sir Percy had a mad moment of wanting to vomit over this vision of vanity, to spoil it with last night's pheasant-and-dumplings, but fortunately the urge passed. The Prince's limp evoked sympathy for one thing, his artfully concealed special shoe evident to the trained appraising eye. Blakeney had been brought up (with many a reinforcing clipped ear) that it was 'wicked to mock the afflicted.'

Then Talleyrand punctured the burgeoning Christian compassion. He theatrically passed the back of one hand across his powdered brow.

‘Ohh,’ he sighed, ‘je suis très fatigué après mon travail aujourd’hui…’

Blakeney almost said something unforgivable, but swivelled on his heels and strode off towards the appointed reception room.’God’s teeth: speak English, man!’ he called back. ‘And get a move on, damn y’eyes!’

Sir Percy’s retreating shoulders clenched as he heard (and had to pretend not to) the Prince comment, sotto voce, on the surprising shapeliness of Blakeney’s behind.

*** * ***

In fact, a full three hours before Sir Percy fumed, Charles-Maurice Talleyrand was up and dressed and already in action.

A week had elapsed since the armed incursion and several days now separated him from his dream visit to Isle of Wight Armageddon. Normal Loseley life was restored.

Accordingly, a staff member, seconded from Loseley’s dairy, aroused his interest in the new day by paying the sweetest lip-service. Talleyrand awoke and knew it was she by feeling her locks all over his loins. Her brother had far shorter hair.

Then, after a Spartan breakfast of brandy-flambéed egg-white omelette, he was ready to face life’s rich tapestry. It would be, however, his own enhanced version of it, not Blakeney’s grey government-issue variety.

The world made its way to Talleyrand via visitors and communications. Journals, letters and informants supplied grist to a mill which ground exceedingly fine. Propped up in bed, the Prince welcomed them all with a gracious smile.

So, the Convention was planning to invade Mantua was it? The regime there (wanted: a term for rule by the indefensible: ‘Disgustocracy’?) would pay handsomely to be forewarned. And Lady Worsley of Appuldurcombe had embarked on her eighth affair of the season, had she? That much-loved lady was slowing down. What was failing: her lust for life or merely lust? Either way, both adulterer (a general) and cuckold (a peer) involved would now be extra… persuadable.

And a Swiss and a lady Lazaran were seeking illegal passage to France were they? And having trouble finding people—even poor sailors—as corrupt as they? In Lewes and Rye? Who would have thought it? To be rebuffed once was misfortune, but twice was sufficient to tug the strands of Talleyrand's cobweb. A third refusal might even tweak Sir Percy's more sluggish version…

Talleyrand sipped his morning chocolate and pondered. Yet outwardly he remained unreadable, a behemoth of bland, a mill pond on the stillest day ever. No observer would have suspected the subtleties now slithering about, like iguanas in a pit, beneath that skull. Unless, that is, they knew his reputation (which all Europe did).

Was his intended 'nudge' to History turning into a battering ram? Has he been wise to blend two such volatile chemicals? To mix the metaphors, were two dull chrysalides blossoming into alarmingly colourful butterflies? If so, should he swat them or supply more breeze to fill their wings?

It was yet another first division quandary, ranking right up there with the looming debate over whether to wear a white or a pearl waistcoat.

Talleyrand was in benevolent mood that morning. Looking through the very same window that Good Queen Bess had during her visits to Loseley, the green Downs struck him as… perfect. There were carriages travelling along the Hogs Back, off on all sorts of doubtless interesting errands. And he had kept an erection throughout the maid's ministrations this morning: no mean feat for a man of his years.

So, the pendulum of Talleyrand's thoughts swung towards 'yes.'

Yes, he would be as kind as the world (falsely) seemed today. He would give the couple a helping hand. Just as the maid had he.

Talleyrand called his clerk of the day.

'Xavier!'

'Highness?'

'Are you familiar with current case 323?'

'Intimately, highness.'

'They are about to commit themselves to the cruel sea. Make it less cruel.'

'Immediately, highness'

*** * ***

‘And Lord Lovelace has written,’ said Blakeney.

‘Gracious me!’

It was Talleyrand’s standard one-size-fits-all response, and could be taken to mean anything—or nothing. Over the course of a working ‘day’ it became like Chinese water torture, with the additional potential to squirm under your skin.

After his long wait Sir Percy’s face was already dangerously dark, a collage of ominous reds and purples. Talleyrand really shouldn’t have…

‘Damn me, do you have to keep saying that?’ Blakeney exploded, hammering the table and making the coffee cups jump.

And not only the coffee cups. A Scottish soldier, pistol drawn, looked in to see that all was well.

The Prince drew back in exaggerated shock, throwing up his hands as protection.

‘Gracious me!’

Sir Percy wanted to bury his head (in hands) or bury his sword (in flesh) or, better still, go home to bed; but duty drove him on. He took deep breaths whilst waving the guard away.

‘I apologise for the outburst,’ said the spymaster, insincerely. ‘You must forgive my temper: I haven’t been feeling myself lately.’

Talleyrand almost embarked on a very unwise response, touching upon the guidance to his staff on that subject. Instead, he bit his lip.

It had been a long afternoon, what with the ‘gracious me’s and pile of pettifogging correspondence to work through. Lord Lovelace’s missive lay near the dregs of the in-tray, amidst material getting short shrift out of sheer weariness. After hours devoted to setting up English spy rings and wrapping up French ones, the marital difficulties of minor Lordlings seemed mere milk-and-water stuff, unworthy of important men’s attention.

Yet the heavy paper and embossed coat of arms commanded some respect. As did his and Blakeney’s mutual membership of White’s Club. Sir Percy’s ear had been bent on the subject several times when he sought sanctuary there from the silly world and refuge in a stiff brandy. ‘Put it in writing, dear boy’ he’d said, hoping to hear no more. However, evidently the noble Lord Lovelace was so unworldly as to mistake fend-offs for promises.

Blakeney rescued the letter and waved it before Talleyrand.

‘No need to read it,’ he said, helpfully. ‘I can tell you the gist. He married a flighty piece, Lord Byron’s daughter in fact: not that you’ll have heard of him…’

The lip Talleyrand had bitten was now pursed. To be presumed uncultured by some Saxon oaf…!

‘Anyhow,’ Blakeney sailed on, ‘what’s bred in the bone comes out in the meat, and she’s acted true to form. Dabbled with science, pestered busy men, slept with Lazarans; that sort of thing. Got herself killed by one in fact. The Home Office denied permission for revival but someone did it anyway. Now, she’s on the rampage, dead as a doornail and mad as a hatter: robbing banks, shooting police and generally disgracing the Family name. Plus she’s acquired an accomplice: we have an artist’s impression available from one of the outrages. There’s been so many I can’t recall which…’

In trying to recall, Sir Percy was troubled. He’d spared all of three seconds to quiz the file that morning and the drawing had shared that brief scan. Now a bat shriek of recognition stirred. Was it mere imagination or had that face been vaguely familiar? Trouble was, Sir Percy had so many cases on the go that all but crucial facts were purged from memory lest his head explode.

Now, hours later, he could spare only the briefest mental chase: Talleyrand was waiting expectantly and there remained ample work to do. No: no good: the will o’ the wisp recollection was let go—if it ever existed.

‘Well, the long and the short of it is milord wants us to put men on the case, above and beyond the Police: get it sorted quick. And there’s a jest for you: I get the impression she had men aplenty on her in life. Now, in death, if you please, her husband wants us to put more on!’

Talleyrand pretended to restrain his ribs.

‘Ha ha! Oh, you are too droll, Sir Percy.’

‘Am I? Well, be that as it may, I want to oblige the chap: it’s embarrassing for him. He never explicitly said so but I reckon it’s best if she just… disappears. Back to Heaven—or Hell more likely—which she never should have left. Romney Marsh has loads of room left in it, if y’ take me meaning…’

Talleyrand did. He gathered that many of the English State’s enemies (or mistakes) resided there on a permanent basis, slowly turning into leathery peat-men to amaze future generations.

Sir Percy realised he’d sounded a bit ruthless, maybe even French!

‘There’s laws been broken,’ he expanded. ‘A life lost; serenity of the Realm disturbed and all that, so the legal aspect’s covered. Plus illegal revival’s a capital offence. But I don’t have staff to spare. Have you got any slack? Could you cover it?

The Prince smiled and inclined his head. It was so… luxurious to be able, on occasion, speak the truth.

‘My dear Blakeney,’ he said, ‘consider it done.’

Which, in fact, it was.

*** * ***

WANTED! WANTED! WANTED!

BY HIS MOST GRACIOUS MAJESTY’S GOVERNMENT

REWARD! REWARD! REWARD!

THE SUM OF £5,000 ENGLISH COIN IS OFFERED FOR INTELLIGENCE LEADING TO THE CAPTURE, ALIVE FOR PREFERENCE, OF A

SWITZER

GOING BY SUNDRY NAMES

BUT OFTTIMES PURPORTING (FALSELY SO)

TO BE OF THE FAMILY

FRANKENSTEIN

OF INFAMOUS RENOWN

SAID SWITZER BEING:

ITEM—6 FOOT TALL. SOLDIERLY BEARING

ITEM—IN HIS FOURTH DECADE

ITEM—FAIR HAIRED, COMELY & BLUE-EYED

ITEM—NEATLY MOUSTACHIOED (PERHAPS)

ITEM—WITH ACCENTED ENGLISH

ITEM—BUT ALSO FRENCH & GERMAN

ITEM—LIKELY IN GENTLEMEN’S ATTIRE

ITEM—OF FOREIGN & VOLATILE PERSUASION

ALL REPORTS & APPLICATIONS TO BE MADE TO THE MOST IMMEDIATE CONSTABLE, AGENT OF THE LAW OR OFFICER OF THE MILITARY ADMINISTRATION

WITHIN THE BOUNDS OF UNITED ENGLAND OR ITS EMPIRE AND PROTECTORATES.

GOD SAVE THE KING!

* * *

Mere shutting of the stable door after the horse was fled. A face and job-saving gesture. By the time the posters were printed the ‘Switzer’ was well beyond England’s grasp.

And that was because, alas, the disparate bits only clicked when it was too late. Somewhen in the early hours when Sir Percy was in fitful sleep, some of his synapses got together and conspired behind his back (or back-brain). Whether it be to help or hinder isn’t clear but whatever the motive they agreed to pool electric charges to zap open a disused cupboard in his memory.

Its door swung wide and within stood an image of Julius Frankenstein. That bally foreigner from the Hecatomb, the one nearing the end of his usefulness. Allegedly Europe’s foremost Revivalist but actually a bit of a dud, Lazaran research wise. Yet still someone to be kept at all costs from the service of the Enemy.

Whatever comprised Sir Percy’s consciousness when he was unconscious matched all this to various Talleyrand-meeting memories. Those brain cells were much more frequented and their door hinges far less creaky. One contained the police artist’s impression.

Eureka! The two recollections met, matched and mated. Sleeping Sir Percy identified dead, mad, embarrassing Lady Lovelace’s accomplice in crime. An outlaw, murderer, bank-robber and general rapscallion Johnny-foreigner!. On the loose and out of control!

Worries about a weak heart and his desperate need for sleep were sternly overruled. Adrenaline production sufficient to wake all systems was authorised.

Britain’s senior spy jack-knifed up in bed as septuagenarians really shouldn’t, hurling off the covers and howling. It was just as well Lady Blakeney was stone deaf and a sound sleeper. He instinctively reached for the pistol under his pillow before returning reason informed him that wouldn’t help much. A comfort maybe, but no help…

The same faculty also blessed or cursed him with total recollection.

‘Bugger!’ said Sir Percy. ‘Bugger!’

It was just as well Lady Blakeney was comatose. There were some practices her sheltered life had spared her awareness of. Sir Percy would rather not have to explain at this late stage of life and marriage, or at this ungodly hour. It was the only mercy in the whole damn business.

He could take the necessary steps of course, but it was embarrassing. He blamed old age and a crippling workload, but that still didn’t fully excuse. And as for his masters and many enemies, they wouldn’t excuse at all.

Heads must roll of course, but preferably deputy-heads. Certainly, they mustn’t include Sir Percy’s. His country needed him. Therefore, best to keep it quiet, as far as you could in the context of a nation-wide man-hunt.

The only problem was whether to tell Talleyrand or not. The man was his deputy after all, with a proven track record of pulling off minor miracles. Perhaps if Sir Percy made a clean breast of it, the Prince would be nothing but silky sympathy, composing elaborate explanations that hadn’t even occurred to the offender.

Which would only make Sir Percy’s writhe with secret anger all the more…

So, no, Talleyrand wouldn’t be told. Not out of any professional pride or anything like that, oh no. But because if he did then Talleyrand would be as wise as Sir Percy was—and that would never do!

The Spymaster rang for his secretary to help him compose wanted posters.

Chapter 13: OH, I DO LIKE TO BE BESIDE THE SEASIDE

‘What’s that?’

Frankenstein and Foxglove followed Ada’s pointing finger back to England.

‘A Martello Tower, milady,’ said her servant, once Julius had shrugged. ‘One of a long line of defences against the French.’

‘And that?’

They looked along the shore.

‘Another one, milady.’

‘And that?’

Frankenstein intervened to stop the madness. There was something about the minds of mathematicians that was not as other men.

‘A yet further ‘Martello tower,’ madam,’ he snapped. ‘If you would but address the wider picture you will observe the coast studded with them at regular intervals.’

Lady Lovelace lifted her head and looked left and right.

‘So there is,’ she conceded. ‘I never realised.’

It was probably true. In life Ada’s days had been spent in stately homes and salons, or in circumscribed localities, perhaps including far-flung Brighton and Bath during the ‘season.’ And then of course there were her ‘studies,’ confining existence to cramped little citadels of computation. Between her wealth and obsessions she had been completely insulated from the longest, grimmest war in the history of humanity.

Ever faithful, Foxglove was there to supply any lack.

‘I understand that the prototype is in Corsica, milady. Cape Mertelo by name. In 1794 it was observed to survive hours of pummelling from English ships and so the model was imported home. Over a hundred were thrown up along the south coast when invasion was thought imminent. Mercifully however, Lord Nelson’s crowning victory at Trafalgar saved them from being put to the test.’

Teetering on the verge of helpless giggles, Lady Lovelace tapped Foxglove on the chest.

‘Nelson’s ‘Victory’—oh very witty, Foxglove. Such drollery: I don’t pay you enough.’

‘Oh no, madam,’ Foxglove blurted hurriedly. ‘I’m quite content…’

For once, Frankenstein agreed with her. Unused to erudition amongst the lower orders, let alone laughter from Lazarans, he studied the pair anew. Ada picked up on that bewilderment.

‘He can read as well as box,’ she informed him. All amusement had suddenly fled like it was switched off. ‘One insisted. I simply won’t suffer ignorance around me…’

Julius speculated what it must be like to be a servant of Ada Lovelace—and the terrifying idea occurred she might now consider him in that category.

If so, she wasn’t the only one. The Mariner interrupted their conversation with typical Sussex lack of respect for superiors.

‘Oi, you,’ he barked at Julius. ‘Can you sail?.’

Suddenly it struck home they were on a frail craft upon a hostile medium, dependant on another’s skills. Frankenstein looked at the complex of cable and canvas above and the dark sea below—and quailed.

‘No,’ he replied. And then felt amplification was required. ‘I am from a land-locked nation. The need never arose.’

Mariner scoffed, as if disbelieving the existence of such men or places. ‘How about you?’ he asked Foxglove.

The servant shook his head.

As did the Mariner. ‘Save us…,’ he said, disgusted.

‘I can… a little,’ said Ada. ‘Mama kept a skiff upon our lake…’

It was as though the rolling ocean had swallowed her words whole. Mariner chose not to hear. If she only could, Ada would have gone pale with fury.

‘Well, girls,’ said Mariner, ‘if we sight the Law you’ll still have to pitch in all the same. Even landlubbers can help pile on sail or dump surplus weight. Listen for my word and then look bloody lively.’

He turned back to the rudder and spat into the sea. As far as Mariner was concerned his companions had ceased to be.

Such disrespect! Both Julius and Foxglove separately swore a settling of accounts—once they were back on dry land. Sadly though, whilst on his element, Mariner must remain usurper-king.

The degradation demanded refined conversation to wipe way the stain. Anything would do.

‘Concerning your Father, dear lady,’ prompted Julius, ‘I have heard intriguing hints from others but little from you…’

Ada continued looking back to land.

‘I have little to tell, herr doctor. To me he was but a portrait hidden under a green velvet curtain in the hall. Naturally, I peeked. A rakish devil—in Albanian national dress for some reason. Perhaps to show off his devilishly fine legs. Who knows? His was not a name to be mentioned to Mama. Yet she loved him still: on each wedding anniversary I know she drew the velvet covers aside and wept.’

Quite why Mama wept was a subject best not pursued. Ada changed tack.

‘The rest is public property, doctor: there is his poetry, and of course the legend: ‘mad, bad and dangerous to know’! That’s it! That’s all.’ Then she stared at him, hard. ‘And what of your father, you have not said much of him…’

In fact he’d said nothing at all, but small talk is not obligated by accuracy. Julius reluctantly dredged in the pool of memory: he disliked disturbing its deceptively still waters.

‘A fine father and plain military man,’ he said eventually. ‘Honourable to a fault, a credit to his nation and profession. He served with decorated distinction in many European armies, and in the Lebanon alongside the Maronites and Druze. Then he died in battle when the French stormed the Vatican. An eye-witness told me he… he threw his life away.’

‘Hmmm…,’ commented Ada, tentatively.

‘Yet it was not a French bullet that broke him but shame. Family shame…’

‘Oh…,’ said Lady Lovelace. Foxglove looked away.

Julius had forgotten that in present company displayed emotion was like public nudity. In fact, lost in recollection he’d forgotten everything external. Moisture clouded his eyes.

‘And your still more famous uncle?’ interjected Ada hurriedly. ‘What of him?’

Frankenstein returned from a private purgatory.

‘What of him indeed? A man bearing my name who bought a curse on his family and all the world. Whilst I was still a child his creation cut a

swathe through my kin…’

Ada displayed her deep research, if not her sensitivity.

‘Yes, so one understands,’ she said. ‘The mere matter of Victor Frankenstein’s wife, brother and best friend. Plus, indirectly, the death of his own father and cousin—and ultimately…’

‘Ultimately,’ interrupted Julius: such that even the dead should have got the hint, ‘ultimately dear Uncle Victor did the decent thing and died. No, I never knew the man—and wish my family never did.’

Ada wouldn’t let go.

‘He reposes in the north I believe…’

Julius shrugged, implying he’d heard so but was indifferent.

‘An Englishman,’ he said, ‘Walton by name, kindly conveyed his carcass back from the Arctic and gave him undeserved decent burial. I know not where—nor care.’

‘Whereas his creation…’ The probe was as gentle as Ada got.

‘Walton says it intended a fiery death at the North Pole—and would mount its funeral pyre with joy.’

Lady Lovelace turned her head aside lest at this vital moment her eyes betray her.

‘The Pole you say? How so, I wonder?’

‘How what?’ asked Julius.

‘How construct a pyre? ‘Tis said the polar region is a tree-less place…’

At first Julius put it down to her scientific bent: a sad affliction always dragging its slaves to facts and pedantry.

‘It had a sled: if broken up that presumably served as fuel…’

Then a less innocent explanation occurred.

‘You know!’ he exclaimed. ‘About the papers!’

Ada turned back and looked coquettishly at Frankenstein over her fan, eyelashes fluttering at full power.

‘One may have heard whispers…’

‘Pipe down there!’ hissed Mariner from the stern. ‘The Revenue sail silent and listen out, you know!’

A Frankenstein-deceived didn’t take orders from menials. The admonition sank unheeded into the sea.

‘You knew the creature stole my Uncle’s research papers and carried them about its person!’ he said. ‘You thought-’

Lady Lovelace was shameless.

‘I thought perhaps they might be retrievable. A second string to our bow should the present plan fail. One’s been awaiting an opportunity to broach the subject. When you mentioned my father…’

So Julius had brought all this unwelcome history on himself. He cursed the minefield of small-talk.

Ada was implacable.

‘Now, herr doctor, as I recall, this very first Lazaran had the notion of commissioning a bride for itself, is that not so?’

Julius now handled her questions like a viper.

‘Allegedly…’

‘Leastways, having perused its creator’s notes the creature believed it feasible: a life-mate to share its years. Therefore the papers were profound. It follows that the secret of the serum may be therein…’

‘Madam,’ said Julius, exasperated, ‘there is no secret: only a formula, widely known.’

‘So you say—and possibly speak the truth. Ah, but if one only had the inventor’s directions! Then who knows what additional wonders might be possible?’

‘Your ‘spark’?’ ventured Frankenstein.

‘Exactly!’ answered Ada, as if a slow pupil had at last caught up.

‘For the last time,’ interrupted Mariner, ‘shut your traps or I’ll…’

Foxglove dealt with the impertinence. He raised a fist and Mariner observed it was almost the size of his face and covered in scar tissue.

‘Just keep it down then,’ he compromised.

Down went both Foxglove’s fist and the volume. But it was in genteel deference to their pilot’s agitation rather than caution. Passions remained high.

‘You bang a broken drum, madam,’ hissed Julius. The monster’s ashes are scattered by the Arctic winds and any papers likewise.’

‘Perhaps. Though the French thought otherwise…’

So: she was as wise as she was wicked. Lady Lovelace had heard of the enemy’s secret Polar expedition to find the creature’s last resting place —and anything that might still survive in its pockets. The British Government were quietly alarmed about it, and Julius had been quizzed about the nothing he knew the minute he arrived in England. He recalled a surreal conversation with a spy-chief about the propensity of polar wind and

snow to put fires out before they'd completed their destructive task. As if a mere military doctor might know!

Accordingly, a British force had gone in pursuit, just in case. Neither nation's party returned, or so rumour said. Right then Julius wished Lady Lovelace with them.

'Ahem…,' said Foxglove.

'Yes?' answered Ada, giving permission to speak.

The servant cleared his throat.

'My lady, As a mere 'landlubber' I am not sure of the correct terminology in this situation, but I believe it is something along the lines of 'ship ahoy!''

And he pointed to their left (or port).

Mariner swivelled like he was greased and then said something not fit for mixed company. Followed by:

'You wouldn't listen, would ye?' He was full of a crazed admix of fear and fury which freed his tongue. 'More noise than a wagon load of women! Bloody gentry! Ruination of the country and everyone! The Convention's got it right: to the guillotine with the friggin' lot of yer!'

'Steady on, chappie…,' Foxglove warned him, quite mildly in the circumstances.

Julius turned in the direction of all the fuss and couldn't see what all that fuss was about. The sizeable ship was way off, even if heading in their direction.

Mariner wasn't so deceived. He wanted—he powerfully desired—everyone aboard should share his concern.

'Twenty minutes,' he advised them, careless about shouting now. 'One hour tops!' He pointed accusingly at Lady Lovelace. 'Then we'll all be as dead as she!'

*** * ***

High above, the galloon kept them in sight as it had since they launched, describing wide circles round and round the suspect vessel. Where possible it scraped the undersides of low clouds, avoiding the moonlight even as it took advantage of it. There was no point in being sighted by the target even at this late stage.

Lantern semaphore kept the craft in contact with the customs cutter below. One towering intellect amongst the Lazaran crew was entrusted with its operation.

‘Signal four aboard,’ ordered galloon-commander (and sole living soul aboard) Lieutenant Neave. ‘No obvious cargo. South-east by east. I will continue close pursuit.’

Play upon the lantern’s shutters sent flashes to convey those words. A code had been constructed so simple that even the Revived conscript couldn’t muck it up. Whatever ‘Lazaranisms’ the signaller inserted, His Majesty’s Navy would get the gist of it.

When he joined that honourable service straight from school, Lieutenant Neave envisaged something more romantic than hanging beneath a bag of gas pedalled into motion by the undead. However, his promotion board had strongly hinted the ‘Fleet Air Arm’ was the place to be for accelerated progress, and he’d swallowed the poisoned bait. That they’d failed to mention career advancement usually came as a result of some poor devil spiralling to the ground in flames still rankled with him. He’d been wet behind the ears then, not making any connection between the power of modern artillery and the fragility and flammability of the gasbags called galloons. He ought to have guessed though, if only from the practice of putting just one live man per craft. The balance of motive and bombing and reconnaissance power was entrusted to expendable Lazarans—and not even the choicest of those.

‘Oh, shut up!’

Neave wondered if he wasn’t really addressing himself and his gloomy thoughts, not the crew with their infernal, eternal moaning. He’d had ample opportunity to get used to that, even blank it out, by now. Ditto the stench of serum and that… cold-pork smell the really bargain basement Lazarans gave off. If so, talking to yourself was maybe just another symptom of spending so many hours in the air, alone (or effectively so). It gave a man too much time to think.

Like thinking of how he’d once dreamed of a posting to the Mediterranean Fleet, or the Far East, where great things were being achieved in India, so it was said. There an enterprising officer with access to Lazaran troops could acquire a private empire amongst the native Hindoos and Mohammedhans who foolishly scrupled to raise such soldiery. Not to mention a harem of exotic houris. Far better company than clouds…

Mind you, his frustration had moderated somewhat when the great Lord Nelson was revived and given the Home Blockade Fleet command. Neave had to grant there was honour and stories for your grandchildren in serving under him, in whatever capacity.

At first some officers, especially the more pious, had grumbled about obeying a dead commander. About how there was no knowing where those orders really came from, and hinting it might be second-hand from the Devil himself. Then the all-clear came from Canterbury and put a stop to all that. Reassurance from the King and the Primate of the Anglican Church surely settled the matter. Leastways, that was how Lieutenant Neave silenced his misgivings on the subject.

Neave hadn't met 'Neo-Nelson' yet; not even glimpsed him from afar, but he lived in hope of it. That prospect and having his own command at the tender age of twenty was surely enough for any man.

Well, that and a share of whatever prize-money was going. Which reminded him…

'Drop,' he ordered, and the sergeant Lazarans lashed their comrades till the even dullest got the message they should ease off their efforts. You couldn't really hurt them but a whip still tickled…

Failing which, as last resort each pedalling bench was rigged up to deliver electrical impulses, powerful enough to kill a man or pain a Lazaran. Fortunately, they weren't needed today. The Lieutenant was always sickened by the cooking fragrance their use produced.

The galloon dipped dramatically as gas was bled out, but all aboard were used to that. They weren't the most robust or manoeuvrable of craft, nor their resurrected motive-power the finest tuned. It was a matter of judging your fall so that it didn't turn into a plummet. Neave had seen that happen often enough in training to be wary of it ever after.

The outcome of the chase below was inevitable now and the cutter almost in firing range. Out of boredom and devilment Neave decided to curtail matters even more, and 'chain of command' be damned. The sooner it were done the sooner he could be done with present company.

There was also the tempting prospect of some righteous target practise. Though he bought brandy and tobacco from them like everyone else, Lieutenant Neave disliked smugglers as a breed. Unpatriotic types, evasive of naval service and taxes alike. Just like whores and lawyers they had their occasional uses, but that didn't make them any less vermin…

Neave took up his carbine and cocked the special spark-minimising mechanism. Would the world much miss a smuggler or two, so long as at least one was taken to confess his crimes? The Lieutenant consulted his conscience and decided ‘probably not.’

*** * ***

A consummate professional to the end, Mariner’s estimate proved spot on.

‘Ten minutes,’ he updated them, and even Julius had to concede it. The pursuing ship loomed large now and had hoisted visible signals which conceivably spelt out ‘stop,’ should you be in the know. Ominous activity at its bow could well be a fore-gun being readied for action.

Though Mariner had hoisted extra sail and heaved anything not nailed down overboard—even most of his passengers’ luggage—his main motivation now was in postponing the inevitable.

‘Can’t even hope for a straight hanging!’ he complained, though busy with hoisting what looked like pocket handkerchiefs as additional sprit-sails. ‘Coastal Blockade operates under Cinque Port laws!’

Julius wanted to sympathise, but lacked sufficient facts.

‘Which signifies what?’ he enquired, to pass the time.

‘The old way: cold and cruel,’ came Mariner’s reply. ‘No quick noose but staked out on the beach waiting for the tide…’

Even Ada, who should stand in least fear of that fate, shuddered. Though revival had put her beyond drowning her imagination functioned just as well as before.

It was not the nicest of pictures to conjure with as they sat there, just so much useless dead-weight, whilst Mariner cursed both Fate and them.

Therefore, the voice from above came almost as relief—after the initial shock.

Four heads traversed as one as they located the amplified sound. It came from a direction from which only seabirds should speak.

But seabirds don’t speak English (as far as is known). Nor make death threats.

‘Heave to or I fire!’ ordered Lieutenant Neave through his megaphone. A gun barrel levelled through the cupola side window proved and

reinforced his point. ‘Lower sail and surrender!’

Till then their minds had merged the sound of the galloon with that of the waves, but now in beholding it they could separate the two. It had a gaseous hiss and Lazaran groan all of its own. Parchment faces peered incuriously at them from the few portholes.

Ordinarily, the Lion and Unicorn emblem on the craft’s side would have reassured, but no longer. Each in their own way, those aboard the fugitive skiff had put themselves beyond those beasts’ implied protection. In their persons they personified the very definition of ‘outlaw.’ Right now it felt cold and lonely in that zone. And wet too: the sea was getting up to match their stormy fortunes.

Perhaps by coincidence, or maybe miffed at being pipped at the post, the cutter now fired a warning shot. Perhaps. Its vibration ‘thwwwwm’ed by and split the air parallel to the skiff a mere two lengths off to port. Either the cutter’s gun crew were very sure of their skills or the ‘warning’ was of the killing kind.

Between not one but two devils and the deep blue sea, Mariner moved to obey. Cursing but compliant his hands headed for the sail ropes.

Julius neither judged nor condemned. Presumably, Mariner’s thinking ran along conventional ‘whilst there’s life there’s hope’ lines. The illogical optimism that rules most men said there might still be a few seconds of pleasure between now and when they shackled him to a foreshore for death by slow drowning. That slim hope alone made surrender the sensible option.

Frankenstein was not as most men. Nor, though Swiss, had he ever much cared for ‘sensible.’

‘Now might be the time, madam,’ he hinted to Ada.

‘It certainly looks like it,’ she agreed, calmly. ‘Time to die. Again.’

‘No, you misunderstand, foolish woman! I meant for you to swim!’

He indicated the broad ocean expanse: and every direction her oyster.

Lady Lovelace sat up straight, offended.

‘I do not swim,’ she said, with finality.

‘You cannot?’ Julius was incredulous. He’d assumed that, the English being a notoriously sea-faring race, they were all semi-aquatic from their earliest years.

‘I did not say that,’ Ada answered. ‘I said I do not. It is undignified.’

Foxglove nodded confirmation.

One of Julius' father's favourite maxims was 'never argue with policemen or lunatics.' His son had imbibed that from earliest years, along with 'Do what you want—but don't whine about the bill.'

So instead he stood and took aim at the galloon.

Lieutenant Neave hadn't been expecting that. No one had. Accordingly, his own shot went wild.

What with the waves and it being extreme range for a mere pistol, Julius' reply was impressive. Its bullet shattered the pilot's windscreen but not his head as intended. Lieutenant Neave was duly impressed, amongst other sentiments.

'What the…!' said Mariner. Death in many varied forms encompassed him on every side. A notion which had occurred to him oft times before now returned with the force of Divine revelation: Life isn't fair…

'Stop that,' ordered Frankenstein, meaning the slackening of speed. The authority of education and class was backed by a second, still loaded, pistol.

'One shot: that's all it'll take,' Mariner advised, meaning the closing cutter, not Frankenstein's far lesser weapon. 'We'll be nothing but blood and splinters…'

Even so, he withdrew his hand from the ropes sustaining their progress. Unlike the cutter's cannon Julius' gun was both near at hand and near his head.

'Since we're all good as dead anyway,' observed Frankenstein, 'I can't see that it matters…'

Mariner deferred to the 'logic' therein.

Having got his way in that respect, Julius returned to the galloon question. Lieutenant Neave was frantically reloading as best his confined cabin allowed. Frankenstein took the opportunity to take extra careful aim.

Neave's nerve snapped before Julius' investment of effort could pay dividends.

'Up!' His command to the crew could be heard loud and clear through the pierced screen. 'Up! Damn y'eyes!'

Prow first, the galloon made an emergency ascension, gas valves being flung open as they came to hand, regardless of grace and stability. The Lieutenant, on whom Julius was drawing bead, was flung back into the unseen interior.

Frankenstein could have fired anyway, but now there was a new fish to fry. The cutter roared again and this time unmistakably in earnest. The heat of the ball as it passed not far above caressed all their faces. When they then looked up, as a natural reaction to still having heads, it was to note that most of the mast was no longer with them. Such was the force of the blow, it had not snapped or splintered but was simply swept away in silence.

Though most likely a fluke shot it did the trick perfectly. The sails descended like a eager bride's nightie. Straightaway, the skiff's speed bled away, courtesy of less than half a mast left for the wind to play upon. Simultaneously, akin to the canvas, all resistance went out of the craft's contents.

Except for Julius that is. Regaining balance via the sudden loss of progress, and shrugging off a shroud-like corner of sail, he shifted aim to the customs cutter as it hoved to.

To outside observers it might appear the merest romantic gesture, but there was method in his madness. Frankenstein had taken on board Mariner's intelligence about savage 'Cinque Port penalties,' and he really didn't fancy being slowly nibbled to death by the tide. As he saw it, once the range closed he had a fair chance of dropping one of the gunners, or possibly even the captain should he show his face. With luck, that pointlessly taken life aboard the cutter might anger their conquerors enough to deal out swift ends. Like sinking them there and then. Or summary trial. Skilfully done, hanging could be quite quick, so he'd heard.

That was how Julius' rational faculties justified the 'gesture'—but they were just a decorative facade, designed to deceive. The simpler truth was he wanted to go in style, and here was the opportunity. 'Never give your life away: sell it!' was another adage of his father that he lived (but apparently didn't die) by.

Or, deeper still, maybe despair ran in the family.

Julius' smile as he sighted along the gun barrel should have been a massive clue to one and all, but trapped forever within his own skull Foxglove couldn't see all these rich layers of meaning. He had to act on external signs.

Fortunately, Frankenstein's mouth was clamped tight in concentration. There'd be no danger of bitten-off tongues.

Foxglove's raised eyebrow queried. Ada's nod approved. The servant's fist met Julius' jaw.

Chapter 14: A FESTIVAL OF FALSEHOODS

‘Well, I say he did!’

Julius didn’t recognise the voice. Curiosity made him open his eyes.

As well as the cutter, which had grappled alongside, there was a ship’s officer looming over him. More to the point, the man had the tip of a naval cutlass poised above Julius’ navel. He gave every indication of wanting to pin Frankenstein to the skiff’s deck like a collected beetle.

‘I give you my word of honour as a Lady,’ said Ada, off to one side.

‘A dead lady,’ said another of the boarding party. Ada huffed.

‘Well, really!’

It didn’t work. The homicidally inclined officer’s expression and posture remained unchanged. So Ada changed tack.

‘Very well then, if the oath of a person of quality is insufficient, perhaps you’ll accept the evidence of your senses. Where exactly is this pistol he is supposed to have pointed at you?’

Overboard, thought Julius: the second phase of Foxglove’s pre-emptive strike. Wisely though, he kept his theory to himself.

‘Our galloon scout swears he was shot at…’ However, Ada had hit home. A slice of reasonable doubt now entered the officer’s tone.

‘All those solitary hours, up in the sky,’ Ada insinuated, ‘with only the Almighty and Lazarans to commune with… I dare say the imagination can run riot. And besides, his is a very junior branch of your heroic service…’

The officer considered. Flattery from a pretty, albeit Revived, woman? It sufficed to sway his decision to the one he knew he ought to make. The sword withdrew.

‘Very well, I am a merciful man; your companion shall live. For the moment…’

‘Not only merciful,’ Ada gushed, ‘but also a most gallant officer…’

Julius was learning a lot, even though laid out on deck. Firstly, Lady Lovelace had pledged her honour to a downright lie, and now she was tugging men along by the tassel. He was duly warned.

‘Hello,’ said Frankenstein, raising himself on one elbow. Speech powerfully reminded him of the pain rampaging round his jaw. It felt loose in places and stiff in others. His voice sounded off-key.

Since ascending from the horizontal didn't provoke retaliation, Julius went the whole hog. He rose to his feet.

'Good evening to you,' he slurred, slowly getting the measure of his teeth and tongue troubles.

'And to you too, sirrah,' replied the officer and tipped his bicorne hat. The gesture was pretty perfunctory but still reassuring. Plainly they were amongst civilised men.

One scan of the balance of boarders soon revised that notion. The rank and file sailors looked feral and hungry. One was a jigsaw puzzle 'patchwork Lazaran'—the lowest, worst kind. If their commander should choose to depart…

'You are no ordinary smuggler, sir,' said that officer to Frankenstein. It was a cross between a compliment and accusation.

'Indeed no,' Julius agreed.

'They must be the ones, Stephen,' said another officer, from back aboard the cutter.

Arms resting nonchalantly on the ship's rail, this second man surveyed their prize and shook his head sadly. 'Has to be. Blast and confound them…'

'There's no contraband aboard,' agreed the first officer, also with a twinge of regret. 'If you discount these three…'

His friend did. 'I said I saw it on daily orders. A Swiss, a she-Lazaran and a bruiser. Now tell me my dear fellow, how many of that combination d'ye reckon are in the Channel tonight?'

The boarding party commander looked at the prisoners and ticked them off the list one by one. He didn't want it to be true but facts refused to dissolve.

'Can you sail?' he asked Frankenstein.

'Yes, I can,' Julius lied instantly. Lady Lovelace and Foxglove did well to keep a straight face.

The officer didn't necessarily believe it but he accepted it.

'Then you can sail her away.' It wasn't permission but an order, with overtones of 'be quick about it before I change my mind.'

'Hey!' shouted Mariner, intuitively leaping ahead of the conversation. 'This 'ere's my vess-'

It was stylishly done. In one fluid motion 'Stephen' drew a cocked pistol from his belt and to Mariner's head without even bothering to look at

the man. It rested on the suddenly sweating brow.

‘Shut up,’ said the officer quietly—so Mariner did.

‘This one’s known to us,’ their captor continued. ‘Contraband or no, he ran from due authority. So he’s ours. But you can keep the boat. I’ll arrange for a jury mast to be rigged, which will get you where you’re going, assuming it’s not too far. However, I must have your solemn vow: on arrival, burn or wreck this wretched craft. It’s smuggled enough for one lifetime…’

It was obvious Mariner burned to say something but a pistol overruled the urge.

So they weren’t going to die (again in Ada’s case), or not yet anyway. A tidal bore of relief thundered down three nervous systems and arrived as bubbly, irrational, joy.

‘I swear by my father’s life,’ said Frankenstein.

And strangely that sufficed! And would have even if they’d known said parent was pre-deceased.

Many commentators blamed the French Revolutions for the horrors of the modern age, and innovations such as mass conscription, ‘total war’ and the liberation of the evil genie of Revivalism from its bottle. Most of the rest blamed the evil legacy of the ‘ancien regime’ and pre-Enlightenment ‘superstition.’ However, one feature of former Christendom not quite extinct on either side was ‘the word of honour.’ Even in present decadent times it remained bankable and might well remain so for some while, until the bank balance of Christian culture went definitively into the red. Thereafter, cheques drawn on it would bounce—and ever more spectacularly.

But that was not yet, and the quaint notion was still subscribed to (in principle, ‘all other things being equal’) by the civilised classes—if only because they might one day need it themselves to get out of a tight corner.

And, right then, at that precise moment, out on the anarchy of the open sea, there was the added attraction that it was the only meaningful contract around.

So the officer nodded and smiled and allowed himself to be fooled.

The gun was taken from Mariner’s head and used instead to point at the wounded mast. Orders were issued to the air with all the blithe confidence that comes from long command

‘Repair this.’

‘Aye aye, sir,’ said various voices.

The gun then airily returned to indicate Mariner.

‘And hang that.’

* * *

By then Lieutenant Neave was halfway home, both his galloon and pride punctured. Which was bad enough, requiring the tedium of repairs and an ‘I regret…’ report, plus probably some teasing in the officers’ mess. What he didn’t know, and still had some precious hours of blissful ignorance about, was just how much trouble he really was in.

If he had known, he might have fairly blamed his upbringing. The boy Neave was never much encouraged to read, and Eton only encouraged his abstention from learning. Accordingly, he never saw the point of reading ‘Daily Orders.’ Which was fair enough and true much of the time—but not the day that Talleyrand had a hand in them.

It was rotten luck. As a result, all that ‘good education’ and all those ‘contacts’ went to waste and Neave never did prosper in the Service. When it was reported what he’d so nearly done with his carbine and gung-ho ways, his copy book was well and truly blotted. Not that the Navy understood the need for fuss and lightning bolts from on high, but bolts there were and they had to hit someone.

Consequently, Neave shuffled up to meet retirement many years later as the never promoted (and thus unmarried) custodian of an old-army-blanket store in Ballymena. Soon after that, a disappointed man and still a mere lieutenant, he wasn’t that put out to meet the Grim Reaper.

His memorial in Rochester Cathedral glossed over his career and instead lied about his piety.

Chapter 15: HONESTY IS THE BEST POLICY. DISCUSS

So, poor Mariner needn't have worried about a slow death on the beach. His captors' thwarted law enforcement instincts didn't let him get that far. Lantern lit, he was writhing from the cutter's yardarm before his former passengers were out of sight.

You might have thought the man would be grateful for that small mercy, but sight and sound suggested not.

Julius looked on as they departed and, now it was too late, protested.

'But the man broke no law,' he said. 'Not today anyway. 'Can they just do that?'

There was no reply. They just had. Modernity stared them in the face. Efficient super-streamlined justice.

Ever meticulous, Foxglove gazed at the ghastly scene and asked Lady Lovelace if she might 'say something appropriate?'

'Certainly,' Ada answered crisply. 'How about: goodbyeee!' And she waved to the dying man.

Then she rounded on Julius.

'Why in God's name did you say you can sail?'

Julius was used to her blustering by now. Compared to the swelling sea and darkening sky it was nothing.

'I thought, madam,' he said to tease, 'that you doubted the existence of our Eternal Father. How interesting that you choose to invoke him now, in this time of peril…'

Peril indeed. In a distinctly double-edged development, the cutter was heading off; its grisly example still visibly doing the yardarm dance. Granted, the prospect of arrest receded with it but directly the grapples were detached and the far larger ship's stability removed, it was brought home to the skiff how much the sea had risen. They were now rocked back and forth as though in a cruel step-mother's cradle. It became hard going to keep your feet. Overhead, the night clouds promised nothing promising.

Lady Lovelace ignored his theological gloating. Instead, she clung both to her point and the patched mast; indicating with a furious face the unpromising scenario all around.

‘Look what your lies have condemned us to! You can’t sail! None of us can! That cutter was our salvation but you let it go! Idiot!’

An impudent wave conquered the skiff’s side and drenched Frankenstein from waist to foot. It looked like to be the first of many, with ample supplies for all.

However, unlike his breeches, Julius’ spirits were not noticeably dampened.

‘I wilfully misinformed them, yes. Do tell what stopped you from correcting me.’ The enquiry came with a smile. ‘Was it perhaps…’

A circular motion of his hand mimicked the operation of a mincing machine.

He thought it a fair bet that Ada had researched his earlier hint about the fate of illicit Lazarans. And she had. Lady Lovelace would have blanched were she able.

Frankenstein pressed his advantage.

‘Calm your fears, madam. Consider the train of events. First disaster: i.e. the cutter intercepting us. Then miracle: its mysterious setting us free. Next, disaster again as we are cast adrift with less knowledge of seamanship than the man in the moon. As a mathematician, surely the next part of the sequence should be plain to you? No? Then permit me to spell it out: disaster, miracle, disaster and then…’

Regardless of fresh wave-wettings, he indicated he was willing to wait for the slow of understanding to catch up.

Lady Lovelace turned away in disgust. If she were any less of a lady she might have augmented the threatening sea by spitting into it.

As if on cue in a gothic melodrama, thunder broke and lightning illuminated far more of the scene than anyone wanted.

‘If I may,’ said Foxglove, ‘I’ve heard that the appropriate action is to strip all sails and sit it out…’

Which they duly did (Lady Lovelace having nodded approval), not having the faintest idea of what else to do.

*** * ***

Dawn should have received a welcome from them, but instead it found the party half-dead (save for Ada, who was ahead of that curve…). They

weren’t just soaked but saturated, and gladness of any kind wasn’t on the menu.

Their gross ingratitude had the excuse that it wasn’t much of a dawn. Diffuse light from somewhere behind the storm was allowed through on sufferance, but not much and not often. Big black clouds remained firmly in control of minor intruders like the sun.

It had been quite a night: dramatic but repetitious. First climb the mountain of a wave, rising to almost vertical, nearly tipping them out of the boat; then enjoy a sickening pause at the crest before plunging down the far side, losing the pit of your stomach (its contents being long gone) en route.

And that was just one wave: tonight the sea had many more where that came from, and another would be along in just a few seconds. Then rinse and repeat, again and again without pause for prayer or sigh of relief, throughout the hours of darkness. Each repetition every bit as thrilling as the first…

Lady Lovelace and Julius just clung on for dear life, but Foxglove lashed himself to the mast with his belt and spent the night baling like a man possessed, spoiling his top hat in the process. If he possessed inhuman powers and if he kept up the same pace for the duration of the storm, then maybe, just maybe, their most likely cause of death might be running ashore rather than foundering.

But, of course, he didn’t and couldn’t, and so taking a break from his labours didn’t make much odds. The big man straightened his complaining back and surveyed the sky.

‘Fimbulwinter…,’ he concluded.

Like most Swiss, Frankenstein was fluent in all the main European languages, but this word was new to him.

‘Pardon?’ he shouted above the roar.

Ada’s chin reposed in her hands. It was possible she was closely monitoring the inexorable rise of water in the bottom of the skiff. Or possibly she was just miles away.

But not too far to explain.

‘Old English for the end of the world,’ she said, without lifting her eyes. ‘My forebears believed it would be preceded by a mighty storm.’

Once again, erudition in the lower orders quite threw Frankenstein. Not only was it beyond his experience but also disturbing on myriad levels. Like returning home to find your hound playing the harp.

‘A storm taking wolf’s head form,’ Foxglove expounded. And gestured.

Indeed, when Julius looked the cloud front did somewhat resemble a monstrous maw advancing to swallow all. It was a tribute to Nature’s sadism—or possibly the power of suggestion.

‘No.’ Frankenstein discounted the evidence of his eyes, thinking to supply comfort and raise morale. ‘Not the end of the world. Merely of us—maybe.’

Ada clapped her hands in mock glee, just as a refreshingly icy wave found home in her lap.

‘Oh goodie!’ she said. ‘That’s all right then.’

*** * ***

Later. Lady Lovelace was cultivating her huff in the minimal cover afforded by a sun parasol. Unsuited to rough salt waves the flimsy thing soon looked not long for this world.

Likewise, Foxglove’s headgear. The top of his top hat had come out and he was having to use his boots for baling instead.

Their accessories closely matched the skiff itself. Spun and buffeted by wind and wave alike, like a human long maltreated by Fate, too much had been asked of it. If Mariner had still been aboard he would have known what to do, even if it was only succumb to despair. As it was their tiny glimmer of hope, probably misguided, was a torment to them.

But for the opposition of the waves they would have been making excellent progress… somewhere. The wind drove them at a fair pace, sails or no sails, but they’d long since lost any sense of direction. Land, if and when it loomed up, might be anywhere; friend or foe—but thereagain, anywhere would do. Always assuming of course, that they didn’t founder first under the weight of the water they were shipping, or smash to splinters on rocks. Little things like that.

Yet there was another remote possibility they’d hardly bothered to think about. Surely no other sensible ship would be about in such filthy weather, not if had a port to shelter in. Clearly therefore, the ship Ada spotted was not sensible, or else it was homeless and/or incompetent just like them.

These were not relevant considerations right now. Lady Lovelace went into action. She rose like a rocket, she screamed like a banshee, she waved like an admiralty semaphore tower.

It was a big vessel, they could tell that much despite the distance and poor conditions. An armed-merchantman, or a frigate maybe. Like the skiff its three tall masts were stripped, but professionally so, not lubberly-style. And though she rode the towering waves heavily, just as they did, she looked by far the better bet for survival.

Ada certainly thought so. At great risk of going overboard she was doing everything a lady might to attract attention across a watery gulf. More so in fact. If her drawers had been red or any other bright hue she would have happily whipped them off and waved them. For what use was a good name without years of life to enjoy it in?

‘Doctor!’ she ordered Frankenstein, in-between her ‘haloos’ and the regular rude interruption of waves. ‘Fire a shot in the air, fire several! Get their attention.’

Julius never ceased to marvel at the European aristocracy. Some times they were as innocent as angels, others as worldly as devils. The former in this case. Not having to lift a hand for themselves from cradle to grave made the class amazingly impractical.

‘I would if I could,’ he replied. ‘But I can’t, so I won’t.’

‘‘Won’t’?’ screamed Ada. ‘ “Won’t”? You? Mr Promiscuous-Pistol! Old shoot-on-sight? Normally, we can’t stop you! Oh, just do it, you damn foreign dago or I’ll…’

Empty threats are awfully demeaning, so Foxglove stepped in.

‘It’s the water, madam,’ he explained with saintly patience. ‘The waves: washing over all night long. I very much doubt Mr Frankenstein has any dry powder left…’

He’d have much preferred to avoid the subject altogether, having surreptitiously ditched Julius’ gun overboard long before. At the time it had seemed prudent, the better to feign innocence when intercepted by the cutter. Now, having survived that passing crisis, his action felt awfully like common theft. And Doctor Frankenstein did so dearly love his firearms. When he found out there’d be ructions…

Meanwhile, Lady Lovelace wasn’t having any truck with tomfool logical explanations. ‘That’s no excuse!’ she said, followed by something

else fortunately swallowed up by the storm. Then she spurned her companions and devoted all attention to the new arrival.

It was nearer now, no doubt about it. The tempest, though 99% malevolent, was doing them this little favour, driving the dying skiff in the right direction. Unless, that is, it was really pure 100% evil and just stoking up false hopes in order to dash them shortly.

But ‘shortly’ was when they’d be within hailing distance. ‘Shortly’ there’d be method as well as madness in Ada’s efforts. Soon even Frankenstein saw purpose in adding his lung-power to the cause.

Now they could see activity on deck, and lots of it. Up and down the poop and middle portions there moved lovely swarms of people. Surely, any second now, one of them must turn and see the vessel bearing down on them.

Apparently not. Presumably preoccupied by the storm, the boiling mob aboard carried on without a friendly wave or word in their direction. At first it was frustrating, a cause for irritation to nerves and straining throat.

Then it grew odd. Then worrying.

Foxglove proved to have a perspective-glass tucked inside his waistcoat. He drew bead with it.

‘Ah.’

Another one of those rich English words, capable of conveying a thousand different meanings.

This version mixed warning with disappointment, albeit decently restrained. The ‘ah’ stayed calm and level—not that that signified not a great deal. Foxglove’s stiff upper lip could have sustained suspension bridges.

‘Well?’ said Ada. ‘Well? Ah!’ That ‘ah’ signified disgust and irritation, courtesy of a refreshing wave right in the face.

Foxglove had been debating whether to say, but his Mistress’s query left no room for manoeuvre.

‘Alas, milady, I fear this newcomer labours in as much difficulty as we. Possibly more so.’

‘Give me that!’

She snatched the glass and, parting her sodden locks with one hand, used the other to see for herself. That left her vulnerable to the sea’s rough ways but the view proved fascinating enough to risk it. Lady Lovelace

stood firm, most unladylike, legs akimbo, and surveyed her to her heart's discontent.

'Perhaps I might talk to them,' she ventured, though sounding un-Ada-ishly hesitant. 'Kin to kin…'

'No,' ordered Foxglove, in a rare reversal of roles. 'Begging your pardon, milady, but I cannot allow that. They are in no mood.'

Ada screamed in fury and flung the petite telescope away.

Because he'd been poised for such a tantrum, but still making a most impressive lunge, Frankenstein caught the thing before the sea could have it. Then he took his turn.

All became clear. A running fight was taking place aboard the vessel—or, more accurately, was drawing to its close. Lazarans had charge of most of the ship now, save for the crew's last stand on the poopdeck. A few men in naval uniform, white-faced as their Revived foes, traded blows with insuperable numbers and were forced back, step by step, to the stern. Elsewhere, in the taken part of the ship, Lazarans were taking vengeance on their former masters. Captured sailors were being forced through the rigging—turned into minced meat—or else just eaten alive. They were women and children, presumably passengers or officers' family, amongst them. It was not the nicest view Julius Frankenstein had ever beheld.

So, the 100% malevolence hypothesis proved correct. Now, just when they'd rather it weren't so, the waves saw fit to bring the two ships together. And they'd been spotted at last. Ranks of rank Lazaran faces stared at them from the ship's rail, or peeked out from open gunports (open in this weather—that should have been a clue long before!). They wailed and beckoned, but not, Frankenstein thought, with his best interests at heart. Some mounted the rail, ready to jump and board.

He'd seen enough and Foxglove got his glass back.

There was the option of clutching at straws, like proposing paddling away with their hands. Or else they could just await developments, retaining residual dignity. Julius plumped for the latter and sat down.

Lady Lovelace would have reproached—maybe even attacked—him, claws to the fore, had not further company arrived. A ship's boat, even smaller and more wave-distressed than they, rounded the mother vessel's stern. Sailors pulled professionally on its oars, accumulating distance between them and Lazaran nemesis, despite all opposition. For, quite aside from the sea's best efforts to capsize the craft, ex-men rained down missiles

on them as they passed. Frankenstein saw one oarsman slump down, brained by a brandy barrel from above. A comrade directly took his place at the oar—and tipped the useless body out.

Ada saw that too and was intrigued enough to comment.

‘How could they be sure he was dead?’

The answer was they couldn’t, but it remained unsaid. Scruples had gone overboard before the sailor had.

Such clear-sightedness did the trick. The row-boat negotiated the danger-rich passage round the ship’s stern, though threatened by each successive wave with being smashed to splinters against its towering side. Then gradually they drew beyond the range of hand-propelled Lazaran enmity and only musketry and cannons remained to worry about.

Evidently, the mutiny aboard was too young yet for that sort of advanced, co-ordinated, action. Or, just as likely, they might be really raw Lazarans: transported for training elsewhere. Either way, using firepower might still occur to them shortly. Julius hoped to be somewhere else—even if only via death—by then.

Meanwhile, the contents of the skiff had a decision to make. The row-boat had seen them and was heading in their direction. Compared to that mere cork in a barrel, the skiff must have looked like a hundred-gun ‘ship of the line’ and highly attractive in present circumstances.

The question was, should they share those attractions? Was there space enough aboard the skiff without bringing forward the hour of sinking to now? On the other hand—and the trouble with life was that there always was another: a second or even third hand to trouble your thoughts—some genuine maritime expertise wouldn’t go amiss. Presently they were mere playthings of the storm, not going anywhere, or leastways nowhere of their own choosing.

And yet who were these men? Was it wise to welcome them aboard in out-numbering numbers, all unknown? They might well be slavers or, worse still, legitimate authority. They might prove to be as ruthless as Ada and hurl the original occupants overboard to save themselves…

It was a conundrum, of the sort that should be susceptible to the awesome powers of human reason. It certainly ought to have been vulnerable to Lady Lovelace, with her trained scientific mind.

In the event, she looked at Julius and he looked at her and neither could decide. The row-boat drew ever nearer.

So Frankenstein tossed a coin.

Chapter 16: ADA WALKS ON WATER

‘Jolly decent of you. We wish you well.’

The third-lieutenant was being ironic, which made a change from the shocked silence of previous hours—and a change, Julius supposed, was as good as a rest.

Frankenstein also supposed both responses were the lieutenant’s armour against the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. Not yet sixteen by the looks of him, and yet here he was directing his very own vessel—the skiff. Or so Third-lieutenant deluded himself.

The boy was wasting his breath addressing his former ship and its new Lazaran owners. They couldn’t hear his mock blessing across such a distance and through such a storm. Not that they would have listened anyway: they were too busy decorating their prize ship with dead men and bits of (therefore dead) men.

The bright side of having to witness it was that, with no hand attending wheel or sail, the frigate was being driven before the wind straight towards the rocky coast; kindly going before the skiff to see if the way was safe. Hence Third-lieutenant’s mock gratitude.

It wasn’t safe. There are few sounds so gut-wrenching as the bottom being ripped out of a ship, even if it’s not actually the wood beneath your feet. Add to that the lamentations of the doomed Lazarans on board and there was quite a symphony to chill the blood. It made even the tempest sound benign.

‘Bound to be,’ said one of the able-seamen, as he adjusted what little sail it was safe to raise. ‘When they’re well lodged on we’ll tack round the larboard of them. They’ll block the worst of wind and wave.’ Then he remembered the niceties. ‘If you’re agreeable, sir?’

Third-Lieutenant scanned the boiling white water along the shore and knew no better.

‘Make it so.’

‘Aye, aye, sir.’

Myriad tugs upon ropes and minor adjustments turned their path away from immediate ruin. The sea fought them tooth and nail but the sailors had their way.

Ada, Foxglove and Julius were relegated to the skiff's stern. Not exactly spurned, but not consulted either. It had been that way since the survivors of the mutiny were allowed over the side. Their technical proficiency gave them mastery of the vessel after the briefest of introductions. Now, following a shaky period just getting the skiff under control and ensuring survival, the former hierarchy of His Majesty's frigate 'The Lady Bridget' reasserted itself.

For his part, Frankenstein marvelled at how grizzled men of far greater size and experience deferred to a beardless boy, just because of epaulets on his skinny shoulders. It reminded him of a bull he'd once seen, a ton or more of sheer muscle power, being meekly led along by an Alpine herdsman. The beast might have flung its master off the mountain with the merest flick but it chose not to, subdued by a tiny nose ring and long habit. There was a metaphor and lesson there, for those who studied humanity.

However, these were dangerous thoughts, subversive of all societal and family ties. Frankenstein consciously turned away from them lest he too catch the disease that had turned France mad.

'Do you despair of your former ship, young sir?' he asked.

Burdened by responsibility, Third-lieutenant appeared to have forgotten he had passengers. The youth jumped at being suddenly spoken to in non-sailor.

'What? Oh, it's you…'

'You' included Ada. Earlier she'd tried to ingratiate herself, joining Third-lieutenant on his bench. His quick scan and resultant 'ugh!' made her retreat to ponder how much things had changed since a flashed eyelash would open any door. She'd sulked in silence since.

But there were other strangers aboard beside her; plainly living ones. Third-lieutenant felt obliged to reply.

''Despair'? Well, that's a strong word… But, um, yes. Sadly so.'

Things weren't yet quite as before. One of the senior seaman felt free enough to speak without bidding.

'She's impaled,' he affirmed. 'You mark my words mate: next big wave will move her along and take 'er bottom. Poor old Bridget!'

Third-lieutenant frowned but wasn't so sure of his authority as to protest. Maybe when they were on dry land…

'Yes, thank you, Cowley. Steady as you were…'

‘Cowley’ recalled himself and knuckled his brow—the Service’s sign of subservience—before knuckling under.

Just on the edge of it not mattering any more, the storm showed signs of dying down. The thunder and lightning display had played itself out ages back; now ‘only’ a wicked wind and frenzied sea remaining to finish the job.

Which it would. It drove them on stronger than sail or oar could counter. Returning to open sea to sit things out wasn’t an option: proper professional seamen agreed on that and so even Ada had to believe.

The coast was very close now and the larger sand dunes discernible. But first the offshore rocks awaited like jagged teeth; a giant’s jaw line showing just above the water.

There hadn’t been opportunity before and Frankenstein’s curiosity was piqued. He didn’t want to die not knowing.

‘What happened to you?’ he asked swiftly, to keep Third-lieutenant’s attention.

There was nothing the over-promoted youth could do to materially effect things—Cowley and co. were in charge of that—and so he seemed almost glad of diversion.

‘A mutiny,’ he said. ‘It happens occasionally.’

Ada and Julius exchanged glances. Third-lieutenant’s words said one thing but his face another. Frankenstein had heard enough of England’s famous navy to know that loss of a ship attracted mandatory court martial. Third-lieutenant was probably the senior surviving officer and, should he continue to survive, must eventually give account of himself on behalf of all.

That same thought must have occurred to the youth. In giving further detail he was probably rehearsing his testimony.

‘We’re a ship of war, not a troop transporter: especially not that sort. And they didn’t supply enough chains. Plus the Lazarans weren’t broken: too fresh. Things aren’t going well in the Basque enclave, so we were rushing reinforcements…’

It satisfied Frankenstein, but not, alas, Third-lieutenant himself, who must have had the less generous audience of the Admiralty board in mind. Just like the Allies’ enclave in Spain his defence required reinforcement.

‘It was during feeding,’ he added. ‘One of them refused to eat from the offal barrel. I think it must have been an officer or gentry beforehand and

had residual memories. So we made it take its turn… forced it to eat. And things went from there. The spirit of rebellion spread like smallpox…'

'Too quick, too many,' contributed Cowley, again without being asked. 'No time for the swivel guns.'

Reliving the vivid scene before his eyes, Third-lieutenant may not have heard, or maybe graciously overlooked the breach of etiquette.

'Captain Barker tried to get on deck…' There was a catch in the young man's voice. He was no longer before an imaginary tribunal but explaining to a wider audience, including the Almighty and himself. 'But they got him at stairwell. They… tore him apart.'

Suddenly, he stared straight at Julius in frank appeal.

'I fought. I did fight. But when we were trapped on the poopdeck getting off seemed the right thing to do. Yes, we left people but they just couldn't be rescued. We only got one boat away as it was: there wasn't room for all…'

It mustn't have been a bad ship to serve in. The half dozen seamen, tattooed veterans all, looked on the young officer with compassion, as to a son in distress.

'You did the right thing, sir,' said Cowley for all. 'Chin up, there's a good gentleman! Stiffen y'lip. Oh—and stiff grip on the sides too, all of ye. We're going in!'

It still looked like standard sea to Frankenstein but he submitted to a trained eye. He and Ada and Foxglove braced themselves against the stern rail.

The stranded Bridget was breaking up. Waves penetrated to have their way with her and departed taking whole timbers as souvenirs, making it easier still for the next in. Each watery inundation likewise swept up a bevy of Lazarans and sucked them into the deep. They wailed and waved until a bashing against the half-seen rocks pacified them.

Frankenstein heard the mainmast crack and saw the Union flag atop it dip in surrender. The next fluid hammer blow, or maybe the one after that, would swallow it up.

He was not alone in observing. Maybe half their new friends in the skiff had brimful eyes. Julius was torn between thinking it shameful sentiment or touching.

'Now!' said the man watching at the prow—and secured himself a death grip to either side.

Something implacable started to eat the bottom of the boat, chewing and spitting away splinters. It roared as it dined.

Frankenstein felt a powerful impulse to swing his feet up on the bench to escape the unseen monster below, but at the same time feared to appear womanish. Self-respect won over self-preservation—but only just.

Ada, who had a perfect excuse for effeminate acts, was reacting better than he—by not reacting at all. She sat quite still, the remnants of her parasol unfurled again, and awaited what would be. Foxglove was as close to her as decorum allowed, poised to put himself between her and harm. Lady Lovelace showed no sign of acknowledging that devotion, or indeed any external fact.

Looking to the future (and assuming they had any) Julius could now see individual rockpools and flotsam accumulations on the beach. It looked as inviting as Eden after their eternity afloat. Even the early Lazaran arrivals, or bits thereof, could not detract from the lovely sight.

‘Now or never, boys!’ called Cowley, just audible above wave, wind and ripping wood. ‘Jump!’

* * *

‘I can’t see what all the fuss was about!’ commented Lady Lovelace as she stepped ashore, barely getting her boots wet (or wetter).

If his hands hadn’t been busy keeping his balance Julius would have pinched himself. In his experience, when things seemed too good to be true then they generally were. Yet, apart from a scraped palm courtesy of some barnacles, he made it to dry land unscathed. Ditto Foxglove and almost all of them. They even retained the essential baggage they’d refused to let Mariner heave overboard, plus all their portable wealth: the latter safely secured to their bodies in waterproofed money-belts.

The skiff retained vestigial structure long enough to surf the worst rocks, sacrificially absorbing the punishment they doled out, and in dying delivered its charges into merely waist-high water beyond. As related, Ada was extra-special lucky. The stubborn pair of spars on which she stood kept their form to the last gasp, allowing her to merely step off onto sand, as though even the cruel sea deferred to her sense of dignity.

Not only that, but their undertaking to ‘Stephen,’ the cutter officer, regarding the skiff was fulfilled without further effort or conscience searching. It had been a good old boat to them and they were belatedly grateful to it, but now, as per vow, it was no more.

All that spoilt things was a final wave, which reached into the still(ish) waters and snatched back two seamen. Like a spiteful child it lifted them up and smashed them against stone. Suddenly very relaxed, they surrendered to the sea and let themselves be drawn into its embrace. Seconds later they mixed with the skiff components and receded from view into ocean. No one gave them a second glance.

They were the past; the beach was the future. The survivors embraced it.

Alas, some who had preceded Lady Lovelace and co. wanted to embrace them. A host of Lazarans, many of them displaying grievous rock damage, were stumbling ashore, dripping water and attitude. Rough treatment might have softened their bodies but not their anger. They understood dimly but well enough. Warm humans had brought them to this: warm humans were the enemy…

The random scatter of Lazarans on the beach were still enough to comprise a ‘surrounding.’ It was time for clear thinking and clear direction of forces. The polite fiction about the chain of command which prevailed on the skiff was brutally jettisoned. Frankenstein cut through Third-lieutenant’s first hesitant ‘er…’ and took charge.

‘Form a circle! Anyone with any weapons?’

They could oblige with the first but not the second. Then Third-lieutenant recalled he retained a midshipman’s dirk tucked into his stocking. Julius snatched it.

The nearest Lazaran was the best of a pretty basic bunch: no patchwork at all and fairly similar to what he’d once been. Possibly even some memories of previous life and status lingered. Therefore he was ringleader of all the enmity. He reached out for the warm ones and beckoned others.

Julius knew the score: in such situations it is vital to something—anything—rather than nothing. Frankenstein surged and slashed. Third-lieutenant had kept his midshipman rank memento in good order. The blade cut clean through Lazaran trachea and jugular, not producing the normal claret spectacular but causing the head to loll at a crazy angle.

It served. The Lazaran leader couldn’t see straight any more—his world had gone all cock-eyed. Using the interval of adjustment, the ring of warm-bloods slipped past him.

Into the arms of more like him. Cowley succumbed to a malicious embrace and could not escape it. Other Lazarans caught up and joined the group hug till the confused bundle overbalanced and hit the sand.

Frankenstein could not restrain himself from a sidelong glance. The sand under where he presumed Cowley to be was staining red.

Foxglove felled one, two and then three foes who menaced his mistress. Julius saw the terrible blows leave knuckle imprints on targets’ faces or entirely flatten noses. It was very effective as far as it went but meant neglecting a boy Lazaran who had mounted Foxglove’s back to bite.

Third-lieutenant wrestled with the stripling undead to complete absence of effect. Only when teeth met bone and a scream produced was Foxglove’s sense of duty overruled. He reached back and stabbed a stiff finger into his tormentor’s eye. Julius couldn’t help but cringe when he saw it go in right up to the knuckle.

The boy fell off and Third-lieutenant kicked him. The reward for that was to have his leg grasped and held hard. Failing to drag himself away, he called out in panic.

His companions pretended not to hear. They would have abandoned him, no doubt about it, for self-preservation dissolves all hierarchies and decencies. ‘Every man for himself’ was only seconds away—always assuming anyone could be bothered to say the actual words.

That wouldn’t have looked good at the time or sounded well in retrospect. How kind, then, of the Deity or Fate or random events to send salvation.

Chapter 17: DON’T MESS WITH THE BELGIANS

Happily, at that moment friends came over the hill.

Less happily, with friends like these most enemies were redundant. The long drawn out agony of the stricken ship must have been seen and a robust response mobilised.

The line of lancers paused at the dune line to take the situation in—and seconds later plunged in.

It was a universally agreed precept that ‘turned’ Lazarans were no more use to anyone. Even the most miserly of slavers didn’t dare keep rogue Revived about them. Once they’d developed a taste for flesh and discovered that the warm-bloods weren’t invincible that was it. Sooner or later, one dark night when vigilance was low, new lessons learnt would be put into practice. There was the Marseilles Mutiny as terrible example, and the time it proved necessary to burn Liverpool…

That principle was an expensive one. In the West Indies whole islands had to be cleared and re-stocked when local rebellions broke out. Accordingly, liberal-minded plantation owners were frowned upon, and even run out of the place if particularly kind to their Lazarans. It only took one good apple to spoil the whole barrel, and then you were looking at months of massacres, not to mention ruinous expense. And that was just on smallish Caribbean islands. If the cancer set in on a continental land mass it didn’t bear thinking about.

Which is why the lancers didn’t ask questions. They simply piled in and skewered the scattering Lazarans with zest—and twelve foot plumed lances also.

Contrary to what you might expect, some Lazarans had highly developed survival instincts. Having already lost life once before was the most likely explanation. And with this bunch, escaping captivity and surviving shipwreck reinforced such sentiments. Added to that, the more rational undead present were disinclined to take on cavalry unarmed. Accordingly, the sensible elements fled in every direction.

The rest, the barely sentient ‘patchwork’ jobs and botched revivals, or those eaten up with universal rage, disputed ownership of the beach. They

rushed howling at the new arrivals—and as a by-product left Julius and friends unmolested.

The horsemen met them at the gallop and transfixed a fair few. Then, having burst through and out the other side, they wheeled and returned to deal with the remainder. It was pretty simple work for trained men, as these appeared to be. Several saddles were emptied as they passed and comrades ripped to bits, but it didn't seem to faze them.

Two traverses did the trick and after that it was a merry chase along the shoreline, making a game of how many fugitives could be spitted on one stick. Frankenstein was queasily reminded of a kebab dinner he'd once had in Constantinople.

But stronger still, he was reminded of what a fragile bag of flesh the human frame is—and the alive variety yet more so than the Revived kind. There was little to distinguish them in their present drowned-rat state from the Lazaran horde, except perhaps pinker skin— and in Ada's case not even that. They couldn't just assume they would be immune from the rough justice being meted out to the mutineers.

Already, individual lancers were starting to notice the knot of people trying to pretend they were invisible. You didn't need to be Nostradamus to foretell that things were about to take an unfortunate turn.

'Screen her!' Frankenstein instructed Foxglove. 'Don't let them see her face.'

How refreshing it was to deal with the swift of understanding! Without so much as a 'wot?' the servant complied. He no longer had his top hat but even without it was tall enough to serve as a human shield.

'And you…,' Julius addressed the trembling Third-lieutenant, 'step forward—your uniform might count for something.'

There was no time to wait for comprehension. Frankenstein grasped the youth's collar and dragged him along.

'Wait!' Julius tried it in French, since that seemed the best bet. Certainly, the lancers were resplendent enough in green and gold to number in that nation's army. 'Wait! We are not like them! Or with them!'

But several soldiers had already couched their lances to pedestrian level. Their mounts pawed the sand, awaiting the word

Julius repeated in German and, for good measure, Italian. You never knew—they might be men from one of the French conquests. It could do no

harm. Only one thing was certain: this side of the Channel speaking English wasn't going to do them any favours.

One of the lancers advanced—but at a walk. Frankenstein and his captive put on a burst of speed to meet him more than halfway, to maximise mutual visibility.

'See?' (French again) 'See?' Julius pinched his cheek to produce a blush. 'We are living. They were our enemy. You have saved us!'

The man exchanged words with one of his comrades, but Julius couldn't catch it. Either the distance was too great or it was a language not in his repertoire. The man spoken to shrugged.

Such battle as remained had moved to the outskirts of vision. A sort of peace had returned to the beach save for a few lancers ambling about, pig-sticking those undead who wouldn't lie still. Those not engaged walked their horses over and gradually formed a loose circle round Frankenstein and friends.

Foxglove, Ada (still shrouded) and the remaining sailors caught them up. There was minor comfort in huddling close.

Julius bore up under the scrutiny. It was not in his nature to beg, nor, he thought, good policy at present. In the context of being soaked and shivering and he-knew-not-where, it was a brave show.

Which was rewarded. One of the lancers, an obvious officer from the extra epaulettes and gold braid, rode close.

'Hello.'

He spoke French, but accented in a way Julius failed to recognise.

'Good day, sir,' said Frankenstein in kind, bright as he could.

The hand which held the lance wavered side to side, equivocating.

'It may be, it may not. For you, that is. I have not decided. What are you?'

Third-lieutenant was going to say something but Julius nipped it in the bud by treading on toes.

He chose words carefully; most salient facts first.

'We are living. Victims of the sea. And of mutinous Lazarans.'

The officer raised one eyebrow, in a not-unfriendly 'you don't say…' manner.

So far so good. Julius moved on to specifics.

'I am Swiss. A neutral. With me are my manservant and Lazaran sister.'

The last was a risk in itself, but was swift followed by a bigger one.

‘These are English sailors. They had taken us prisoner on their Lazaran carrying ship.’

Both eyebrows were raised in response to that. Which was better in its way than a lowered lance. Better still, lack of protest from Third-lieutenant vindicated the gamble that neither he or his men spoke French.

Julius relaxed. He had maximised his options, and taken all care. If things turned horrible now it was just Fate’s fault and none of his doing.

As his horse fretted and worried at its bridle, the officer chewed on his moustache for far too long. It was, to put it mildly, a tense moment.

However, such less than nimble decision making gave Julius some clues. It might be useful information if they survived.

Finally the man spoke, still in accented French.

‘Then they are our prisoners now, monsieur. Prisoners of war. But I think you are what you say you are. Probably. A neutral. Likewise your menagerie. Therefore, congratulations on your escape. And welcome to the Belgian Republic…’

Frankenstein had to restrain himself from visible glee at guessing right.

Chapter 18: A SWISS HERO EXHUMED

The organ loft and pipes were a nest of Lazarans. The high altar likewise. They crawled over them and each other like crabs in a barrel, devoid of decorum.

The few soaring intellectuals there who retained curiosity peeked out occasionally at the comings and goings in the nave; but mostly their own writhings and mountings and devourings were enough. Even more occasionally, a wild one would claw at the floor to ceiling wire fence separating the chancel from the rest of the church, but soldiers would prod them back with bayonets.

The Cathedral of Our Lady of the Sea in Zeebrugge had definitely seen better days.

As had Julius Frankenstein. In fact, he went so far as to say he'd never seen anything so hellish in his entire life—and that was saying something.

The plump Belgian official happily conceded it.

'In the Republic we have not raised Revivalism to the art it is in France. Or even England. In the early days the Church forbade it—until the Republic forbade the Church, ho ho.'

He indicated the savagely deconsecrated edifice they stood in.

'They'll keep their opinions to themselves in future, *n'est pas, monsieur*, don't you think?'

Not only was the official speaking French, in his own Belgic fashion, but evidently he was thinking French too. Julius had heard that the Belgians, though nominally neutral, were heavily infiltrated by French opinion—and French agents and 'advisors' too. It wasn't quite a client state yet: Neo-Napoleon's armies had swept by, not through. But once he'd settled the Austrians and Russians' hash, and the Italians and the Greeks and Turks and the Eskimos too probably, then he'd be back. The Belgian Republic was simply embracing the future before it embraced them.

Certainly, their companions of the storm, Third-lieutenant and his men, had received precious little sympathy and plenty of kicks. The last Frankenstein had seen of them was in a farm cart being driven off to captivity or execution, they knew not which. Only his Swiss status and

some rapid talking had saved him and Ada and Foxglove from the same fate. However, once that fact was established they weren't even robbed.

Happily, inbred stoicism kept the Englishmen's protests pretty minimal, but it was still distressing to see them taken away.

Julius should have intervened, he realised. These men's seamanship had saved his life. However, the Royal Navy was not popular hereabouts (the coastal blockade and bombardments, press-ganging, being organised Reaction personified etc. etc.) and so he shamefully heeded Ada's whispered 'forget them!'

'That'll teach the swines!' he agreed with the official, meaning the Cathedral's former owners, not Third-lieutenant and company. He said it with false relish, re-routeing the self-disgust he felt in order to ingratiate himself.

'No it won't,' chuckled the Belgian. 'You can't teach dead men!' He mimicked a noose around his neck and gently swayed side to side.

Then, it struck home that his remark had double value in the context of this Lazaran academy. The man laughed all the heartier and all his bellies with him.

'Well, maybe you can with this lot,' he conceded when he'd done, indicating the heaving mass in the fenced-off Chancel. 'But let me tell you, monsieur, it's not easy.'

'Do please tell,' Frankenstein prompted. 'I'm interested…'

'Really?'

'Certainly.'

The official started on his luncheon of bread and sausage and spring onions, unwrapped from what was surely a wife or mother-packed hamper. From time to time he wiped his hands on his orange sash of office.

For some reason it didn't occur to him to offer any to his company. Julius and Ada and Foxglove remained standing, supplicants before his desk, whilst their host in this new country lolled back in his seat and noisily enjoyed.

'Why is that?' he finally asked through a mouthful. 'Are you in the trade?'

'I was. *Monsieur*, allow me…'

Frankenstein uncorked the hamper's wine flask and poured. The official saluted him with it and sipped with surprising delicacy.

'Well, you Swiss invented the whole business, didn't you?'

Seeing the way things were going, Julius wouldn't accept all the credit.

'We did But it took the Convention to take up the baton and run, eh? As with so many things, the Revolution is the vanguard of human progress, n'est pas?'

The official almost purred. He even set down his baguette.

'Absolutely, *monsieur*. I discern that you are a man after my own heart…'

It was not for want of trying. Julius was progressively adjusting his Swiss French into an imitation of purest Gallic tones, the better to stroke his new friend's cultural cringe. It definitely appeared to be unlocking doors, and might even save them from shooting or life imprisonment, or whatever it was the Belgic Republic did with unwanted foreigners.

Though only half fed the official felt expansive, willing to make minor concessions to show he had a generous soul.

'Well, our training procedures lag behind the more refined methods of other nations,' he admitted, 'but we're catching up, you mark my words. My *chef-régional* thought of this…,' he waved one languid hand to encompass the ex-cathedral, 'and I think you'll agree it's a good idea. Bring 'em back to life and straightaway cage them up in this big space which had become available. Then—and here is the genius, *monsieur*—let their own struggles weed out the weaker specimens, whilst at the same time allowing them to see humans come and go, to acclimatise them. That is why we use the rest of the building as an government office. Which is why you're here. Which reminds me…'

The form he'd been filling in, now stained by spilt spring onions, had been quite forgotten in the course of conversation. Frankenstein was quite happy for it to remain so.

'It's brilliant,' Julius exclaimed as diversion. 'A cheap culling and training process rolled into one. What novelty! What economy of effort! You are to be congratulated, *monsieur*!'

The official modestly accepted only some of the praise.

'It wasn't my notion, not entirely: I only run the place…'

'Any one can have ideas, sir,' Julius greased on, 'the trick is make them real. I think we shall hear more of you and this place! The English may have their Heathrow Hecatomb, the French their *Mausoleum de Compeigne*, yet I warrant this institution boasts the same success rate at one tenth the trouble!'

That almost overdid it. Both supposedly secret places Frankenstein had named were common knowledge but, even so, excess specifics awoke suspicion.

Or would have but for the second glass of wine Julius obligingly poured. The potential poison in their conversation was then purged by an inspired answer to a pointed question.

‘You seem to know a great deal about Revivalism, *monsieur*…,’ said the official. He was guarded again.

Frankenstein looked soulful.

‘Alas, not through choice…’ He indicated Ada. ‘My sister… a sad case…’

The official had seen too many to regard any Lazaran, no matter how pretty, as anything but meat; yet he did Julius the honour of giving Ada a quick scan up and down.

‘No good for the army,’ was his judgement. ‘But I suppose you had your reasons…’

‘A mother’s dying wish, sir. They are as divine commands to dutiful sons. Otherwise, as you so correctly discern, I would never have bothered…’

If looks could kill Julius would have been eligible for the circus in the Chancel. Fortunately, by then the official’s glance had moved on and so missed seeing Ada’s death stare.

‘Well, you’ve got her well trained, I’ll give you that much, *monsieur*. Nicely silent. Maybe you could teach us a thing or two!’

He didn’t mean it. It was a joke between two men on the same wavelength.

‘Now, where were we?’ He was fussing with the paper storm on his desk again.

‘I believe,’ Julius prompted, ‘it was just a few more details and then we were off…’

Actually, that wasn’t quite so, but the official didn’t care to spoil this pleasant chat over (his) lunch by contradicting.

‘More or less, Mr…’ He consulted some paper. ‘Mr Tell. A few extra formalities…’

Julius’ mad mood had persisted beyond the beach debacle, drawing sighs from Lady Lovelace and reproachful looks from Foxglove. In the absence of any identification—all lost at sea, of course—he’d seen fit to test

the official's education by assuming the name of Switzerland's best (perhaps only) known hero.

Happily, the man's schooling and reading proved deficient. 'William Tell' duly went down on the *carte de sejour* being drawn up, reckless of all the problems it might bring later on.

'And where do you intend heading?'

'Home, I suppose,' said Julius, sounding resigned. 'The estate calls, and my dear sister, Miss Tell, is due back at her asylum.'

When the official looked on her again Ada constructed a rictus smile. She even bobbed a curtsey.

'Most commendable,' said the Belgian. 'Most progressive. No other country I know of has institutions catering for family Lazarans. Everywhere else it is either field work or concealment in attics…'

The gaze had lingered and so Ada tried to look grateful.

'Yes,' Julius said to her, loud and slow as though to an idiot. 'I said, yes: back to your sweet little room and cot, my dear. And the embroidery that keeps you busy. I said embroidery, yes…'

Frankenstein was getting a touch too embroiled in this farrago he'd created. The bare bones of his tale about a disastrous sailing holiday might pass muster before this uninspired bureaucrat, but surplus detail could break the spell. Foxglove applied the tip of his boot to Julius' ankle.

Frankenstein transcended the pain without expression and also got the message. The official was none the wiser.

'So,' said Julius, when he trusted his voice again, 'if you could make the carte valid for all points to the Swiss border, then we need take up no more of your valuable time.'

The official liked his time being deemed valuable. He poised his validating stamp above the document with extra added dignity.

'I wish you *bon voyage, monsieur,* and better luck this time!'

The stamp crashed down and suddenly they were legal again.

*** * ***

They ought to have been grateful to Fortune for simply being alive, and to Frankenstein for their freedom. Not only that, but for the first time since Lady Lovelace rose again and Julius fled the Hecatomb, they were

respectable once more—after a fashion. Albeit coated in the wrong names, they were entitled to be… well, to be. No one could legitimately hunt them for sport like they were vermin. It was a heady feeling not to have to skulk.

And yet Ada—and even Foxglove—were still minded to criticise Julius. For instance, for taking things too far and making a game of it all.

But before they could frame words it was brought home to both just how much his crawling had cost Frankenstein. Directly they were outside the Cathedral and out of sight, Julius sought a quiet corner and sicked his stomach up.

Lady Lovelace curled her lip at all the tiger noises and averted her eyes, but afterwards she said nothing. Naturally, Foxglove followed her lead.

Belatedly, Ada was reassured. There was dignity in travelling with a man of honour. But also comfort in finding his honour so flexible.

Chapter 19: NO MAN’S LANDS

‘ “Beginning near the Belgian town of Nieuwport on the North Sea, the system extends in a zigzag through France to the bastions constructed along the Swiss border just south of Pfetterhouse in the Alps”…’

‘How far is that?’ snapped Lady Lovelace, plainly far from pleased. Foxglove consulted the guide till he found the required passage.

‘…“totalling almost four hundred miles in length and consisting of never less than three lines of trenches on each side, the front occupies a band usually three miles wide, including ‘no man’s land’. Estimates vary but it is believed that the war zone contains no less than twenty-five thousand miles of trenchworks in total, more than enough to circle the Earth’s Equator”.’

Too far to walk then.

The plan had been to hit some isolated bit of French shore and work their way inland via unpopulated places. Meanwhile, they’d wait for inspiration to strike about contacting Neo-Napoleon. Now it was clear that the greatest war in the history of their species stood between them and their objective.

Standing on a high hill at a safe distance, the little group surveyed and were dismayed. A titanic plough had been through here but never returned to sew seed or turn the furrow. There remained a wound, a suppurating gash, the like of which Mother Earth had never suffered before. Nothing grew there and it reeked of death. And brimstone. And residual poison gas.

Though both Ada and Julius were temperamentally inclined to dark thoughts it had never occurred to either there could be such a wound upon the world. They’d read of course, they’d heard stories, even seen etchings in the news-sheets, but nothing could prepare for the reality. Even Foxglove was visibly shocked.

For his part, the Belgian coachman who’d brought them here no longer even looked. Once during his first trip conveying tourists had been enough. The wisdom in that was confirmed by the fact that no group ever requested a second visit. Nowadays, he just deposited people with averted eyes and headed back to comfort the horses. They could smell abomination even better than human noses.

‘Is this where they broke through?’ asked Lady Lovelace.

The coachman didn’t even raise his gaze.

‘No. That’s further down. Maybe fifty kilometres. But don’t bother: it’s all the same.’

Ada overlooked his blunt impertinence in favour of looking again. The prospect didn’t charm any better second time round—or third—or thousandth probably.

Meanwhile, their driver was off, without, be it noticed, being dismissed.

‘Just shout when you’ve finished,’ he said as he went. ‘I’ll be by the coach. And don’t go any closer. ‘Tisn’t safe.’

They got the strong impression it wasn’t so much that he cared about them, but that they hadn’t paid yet.

Julius understood why. It was ghoulish to ride out in smart brand-new clothes just to gawp at where so many, so very many, had died. He did not even have the excuse of lost loved ones to justify such a pilgrimage, for Julius’ country had wisely stood aloof—save for mere mercenaries who knew the risks. Likewise, his English companions looked like non-combatants.

‘It might not be for me to say, madam,’ said Foxglove, ‘but I do not think we should attempt to get through here…’

The French had managed it of course, but they were a People’s army, levee en mass, preceded by unprecedented numbers of ‘New Citizens,’ and led by a military genius. Whereas they were merely three civilians. Their modicum of (hot) money might have helped them this far, but neither it or they could afford the quarter million casualties it cost Neo-Napoleon.

Actually, the true extent of the losses wasn’t known and might well be more. Most of the fallen had no grave—or not one they were allowed to stay in.

Frankenstein had assumed the plain hopelessness of this route would free Lady Lovelace from her mad plans. He should have known better.

‘Foxglove, you are right,’ she replied, and wickedly paused just long enough to wrongfoot her devoted servant. ‘It is not for you to say!’

Foxglove blushed and bowed his head.

Yet he had a point, and one that could hardly escape her. Even a blind man could have smelt it. Hell’s Mouth stretched for mile upon appalling

mile between Lady Lovelace and her objective. She had to inwardly regroup before she could push herself on.

‘What precisely would you say are the dangers?’ Ada asked.

Thinking himself addressed, Foxglove flicked through his guidebook in search of a definitive answer. Lady Lovelace hissed and snatched it from him, flinging the thing away.

‘Do you mean me?’ enquired Julius. He’d been preoccupied, trying to outrun the horrible notion that a lot of the white gravel underfoot was actually bone fragments. And if so, should he spread the news?

Ada was as acid as she ever got: victim of an aristocratic upbringing. When thwarted she turned the whip on whoever was nearest to hand.

‘Who else, sirrah? There must be some reason for you to be here!’

He was not employed by her, he had no bonds of affection; even their history together was short. There was no reason not to play her at her own game.

‘Tush, madam,’ said Julius. ‘It’s perfectly safe. After the Great Breakthrough the lines were left unoccupied. Mostly. Some feral undead remain, so they say: a negligible few hundred thousand of them, getting their daily bread the Lord knows how. And certain timid commentators talk of millions of mines, and unexploded shells, and lakes of more than man-height mud, and shoot-on-sight galloon patrols, and…’

‘Shut up,’ said Ada.

Frankenstein pressed on regardless.

‘If you ask me, I think we should reserve it for an after tea stroll on Sunday. Our innkeeper tells me he expects good weather on Sunday…’

‘Foxglove, make him shut up.’

‘No, milady,’ said he. ‘It’s for your own good…’

Which was a turn up for the book. It impressed her more than anything Reason or Frankenstein had to say. Nimble as a ballerina, Ada re-evaluated her options.

‘We could get a ship,’ she suggested, burying Foxglove’s slave rebellion in silence. ‘Risk the Channel again…’

‘No,’ said Julius—and he had never sounded firmer.

‘No,’ said even Foxglove.

Ada thought on and remembered.

‘No,’ she agreed. But then: ‘Yet we have got to get through somehow.’

For a space, Frankenstein deluded himself he had an ally in Foxglove, but when he looked across at the man his gaze was avoided.

So, here he was alone again: the most unlikely ever ambassador for sanity.

‘Why?’ he asked. ‘Why must we?

‘I refer you to the Council of Box Hill,’ snapped Ada. ‘It was all dealt with there. I got the distinct impression you were present…’

Indeed he had been. He’d not had voting rights, but he’d been an observer. And therefore complicit in the lunatic resolutions passed.

Julius Frankenstein looked behind him. There lay Belgium and, beyond it, using the eye of faith, Holland. Two statelets too crazed with commerce to realise the state they were in. Come the day the Convention could abide their offensive bourgeois presence no longer, they would be swept away in an afternoon: toy armies and all. It wouldn’t even take Bonaparte himself, but just one of his galaxy of star-generals, to deal with them in short order.

They would be juicy plums to pick. What little Julius had seen confirmed the legend that the Low Countries had exploited Lazaran economics about as far as they would go—even to the far side of the world in fact.

Belgic and Netherlands Lazarans dug dykes and forced the sea back, field by field, careless of casualties. Their treadmill power turned the windmills which dotted that reclaimed land. Then the money that earned bought merchant ships for which Lazarans were shipwrights, dockers and crew; making and ‘manning’ a fleet that carried forth manufactured goods and brought back riches. Naturally, or perhaps unnaturally, it was Lazarans who laboured twenty-four hours a day, chained to benches in the factories that made those manufactured things. Word was there were even undead explorer ships, completely expendable of course save for a living captain to report back, sent to seek out new lands—and markets.

In short, this was the virtuous economic circle that had let the Republics scale the moral high-ground and abolish slavery. They were bursting with the prosperity that came from bursting open the grave.

In the few short hours he’d graced Belgium with his presence, Frankenstein had seen as many Lazarans as living humans; perhaps more. Reports said Holland was worse. They were asking for trouble of course: sooner or later some Revived Spartacus would do the arithmetic and rise up,

but in the meanwhile there was a lot of money being made. The French Convention, for all it was supposedly above things like worldly wealth, would thank the Lowland Republics for that in due course. When ransacked they would sponsor the invasion of some other countries, maybe other continents.

Telescoping down to personal considerations, the big question was: did Julius want to turn back and be a part of that, to await, albeit in comfort, the arrival of the inevitable in the form of the French?

Answer: no. Or NO! If the French were fore-destined it was better to go meet them now, on his own terms, at a time of his choosing. Which, however weirdly, meant his thoughts coincided with Ada's.

Which in turn meant his thoughts must be wrong, though he couldn't quite see how at this moment.

Therefore he cast about for other options. How about home?

That thought provoked a bitter laugh. Leaving aside the country-wide outlawry notice on him, the Helvetic Republic contained too many memories of murdered family. The first Lazaran of all had not only deprived him of kin but indirectly of Fatherland too. Even a Swiss firing squad was preferable to a moment's actual residing and reflection there.

Which just left going forward. Which implied crossing the forsaken front-line before them. Which was impossible save for an army—and a army careless of its men's lives at that.

Ada was still waiting for his response. She must have sensed he was at a cross-roads, for she never normally waited for anyone.

If it was going to be done, it was best done quick and get it over with. Frankenstein drew deep breath.

'Upon reflection,' he said with finality, 'I see that you are right. France it must be.'

When she wanted, Lady Lovelace could fake sincerity like no other. She also thought she knew which strings made Frankenstein dance.

'Well, that is where the 'escape and adventure' I promised you lies…,' she said, in warm, welcome-home-prodigal-son, tones.

Julius only heard half of it: the 'promised you lies' bit: which happened to be the true portion, so he didn't protest.

Thus are decisions made. Yet Frankenstein was still distracted, pondering whether he should tell all. About his terrifying vision.

It only took a further second. Being here, in this horrible place, emboldened him. Here, where so many lives had been thrown away like they were nothing, or less than nothing, put his own petty story into perspective. Why was he making such heavy weather of living a mere three-score years and ten, if you were lucky? One way or the other, not a great deal mattered much anyhow…

‘Live your life, Julius’ he told himself.

And so he said:

‘I have this idea….’

Chapter 20: FROM ON HIGH

Several scenes from a bird's-eye view: an all-seeing, all hearing, but nosey bird, with no regard for people's privacy.

* * *

'Well, I think it's a very bad idea,' said Foxglove, before passion subsided and he remembered himself. 'Milady…,' he added.

'But very stylish,' said Frankenstein, knowing it to be a done deal anyway. 'Bags of style!'

'Indeed,' concurred Lady Lovelace, not actually caring a damn about style or any other inessentials, but willing to conscript it to her side. She deemed no more need be said.

Nor need there. Foxglove's outbursts were few and short (if not sweet), but came from the heart and with the best of intentions. The house-broken bruiser sat back and became like a statue again.

The undisputed good thing was their heading away from the terrible trenches. Less unanimous was their trajectory to the Free City of Luxembourg: as 'agreed'—but only after argument and Julius putting his foot down. Deplored by all was the fact of their new inseparable companion.

The sinister sealed coach followed them at a discreet distance.

* * *

It had shown up not long after they arrived at the former frontline viewing point. Frankenstein noticed it directly and long before the others would. Products of their relatively happy national history, the English tended to be less skittish on such scores than continentals.

He'd let his companions in on the news directly after the great 'what-next?' debate. Ada had queried why they had to go all the way to

Luxembourg to catch a France-bound galloon? ‘The Belgians have them too you know’ she’d said.

‘Because of that,’ Julius answered succinctly. With a flick of the thumb he indicated their new companion. ‘No, don’t turn round: they’re watching us. Just be aware we have company and act innocent.’

Foxglove complied by not looking at all, but Ada could not be deterred from a slow motion turn. Eventually, the second coach came into Lady Lovelace’s peripheral vision.

‘Mere sight-seers, like us,’ she decreed. ‘A young couple; honeymooners I shouldn’t wonder…’

Save in dire need, it wasn’t Foxglove’s style to gainsay his mistress, but there remained a range of euphemisms he could deploy.

‘Possibly, milady, possibly…,’ he said. ‘But a battlefield’s an unlikely port of call for a nuptial pair, don’t you think? Hardly what you’d call romantic…’

‘The couple are just cover,’ Frankenstein confirmed. ‘Others remain inside. I saw sunlight flash upon a perspective glass…’

Acting like he’d had enough for one outing, Frankenstein casually sauntered back to their own coach driver. He was going to ask if the newcomer was known to him, but the man’s nervy demeanour resolved the matter without words.

By the time Julius returned Lady Lovelace had considered and concurred.

‘Who would have thought,’ she said in wonderment, ‘that the Belgians even had a secret police?’

Frankenstein was amused.

‘The *Ancien Regime* is over,’ he informed her. ‘The State now stands in for God. What other choice do the poor Belgians have but to conform? Welcome to modernity, madam.’

Lady Lovelace took that compressed lesson away to digest in silence. For once she didn’t mind being lectured. The broad sweep of history be damned: the main thing was that she’d got her way. There’d be no more caveats from Ada—not till the next gap between want and have opened up anyway.

So, Luxembourg it was. And urgently, before the Belgians’ fully justified curiosity evolved into something worse.

‘Mr Tell’ and company set off and, a token while after, the second coach set off after them.

* * *

When he heard of it some days later, Talleyrand was delighted that his corps de ballet of spies, some deliberately conspicuous like the ‘Belgian’ coach, others invisible as air, had restored contact. Up till then he’d feared that circumstances beyond control, such as that inconsiderate stormy sea, might have taken Lady Lovelace and entourage from him. To hear otherwise made him clap two lace-fringed hands together and bestow such a charming smile upon the messenger. Later that same evening and for the same reason, a roadside beggar had his life changed forever by a bag of golden guineas cast from Talleyrand’s carriage.

That the (comparatively) innocent Belgian Republic got blamed for his scheming would have been sweet sugar icing on Talleyrand’s cake of deep joy—but sadly he never knew that.

Nevertheless, the Prince was well content with his present level of informedness. To aspire beyond that was to trespass into territory reserved for the Almighty alone: wherefore he humbly withdrew. The excommunicated former Bishop and serial turncoat had many mortal sins on his charge sheet (including those the Church said ‘Cried Out to Heaven for Vengeance’), but blasphemy was not amongst them. The man Emperor Napoleon had described as ‘shit in a silk stocking’ was far too fly to offend the Omnipotent.

‘Tell our people to play them out a little more rope,’ he instructed his agent. ‘There’s not quite enough to hang themselves yet.’

Chapter 21: WE CAN SEE YOU

Surveying another cathedral (save this one was still open for business) Frankenstein and Lady Lovelace and Foxglove behaved like they were family plus flunky passing through on a ‘Grand Tour.’ Devotees of high culture ticking off inspirational architecture on their list.

In Luxembourg the disguise was quite plausible—albeit these particular ‘tourists’ somewhat less so. A unscrubable whiff of ‘post-apocalypse’ hung about Julius and co., whereas residual pre-Promethean War normality lingered in the City. The French hadn’t incorporated the place when they boiled through during the ‘Great Breakthrough,’ but instead respected (after a fashion) the rule of its Prince-Bishop. Of course, it had been pillaged down to its underwear, even (or especially) the Churches, but in theory there remained a self-governing city; one of the patchwork of petty states and historical accidents that collectively comprised Germania. Once the war went east and then global, Luxembourg was left behind and got on with its own business unmolested. For the time being.

In the contemporary lottery of life that was no mean achievement anywhere. On their way in, Frankenstein and friends had received yet another unsolicited crash course in present-day harsh realities. The statelets traversed were silently instructive—but not in the sense they once graced the itinerary of every Grand Tour: as aesthetic academies and/or fun stays. Now, those not physically ravaged by war were indirectly so. Denuded of male citizens (all either dead or in arms or both), Lazarans kept the show going—or limping—along. Resurrected people drove—or, more often, hauled—the ploughs. Death and the scent of ‘serum’ hung over all.

Hence it had been a depressing trip. Shepherded by their shy ‘Belgian’ shadow, they saw only vistas of civilisation visibly in retreat.

Which was why Luxembourg was such a tonic. If only by contrast as a haven of prosperity and home to myriad still-warm humanity. Not only that, but crucial to Ada’s aims, it still boasted a civilian aerodrome.

That had been a sleepy little facility before ‘History’ intruded; catering mainly to the Prince-Bishop’s Episcopal progresses. Changing geo-political imperatives altered all that. Now it was quite a hub. The party were biding their time before heading for its hubbub.

One of the ‘day-one’ acts of French Conventionary Government in all its conquests was to nationalise every aircraft. They couldn’t for the life of them see why mere civilians should gallivant in the sky whilst the class struggle hung in the balance below. And besides, there was the danger of aristocrats and other enemies of the People escaping that way. Instead, collaring the collective national fleet, they used them to rain bombs and air-mobile columns of revolutionaries on their enemies. Zeal and sheer elan carried them halfway across Europe—till the trenches rendered both qualities irrelevant—and suicidal.

Later, when revolutionary ardour cooled and the wars turned gutty, there was even less justification for jaunts and fun. With the rainbow-hued vessels of Europe’s leisured classes long since confiscated and painted grim, and the factories unable to keep up with war losses, those merchants without contacts in the Convention or money for bribes lost their galloon fleets too. Which plunged Europe’s economy further into free-fall recession —though with the happy by-product of creating unemployment just when the army desperately needed fresh flesh. The leaders of the Revolution congratulated themselves on killing two birds with one stone.

All of which is to explain why tricoloured galloons criss-crossing Luxembourg’s airspace, locating their position via the Cathedral’s spire, had become such a familiar sight as to be invisible to the natives. No one pointed any more. Not that it was anyone’s business noting their conqueror’s ways in any case: open curiosity often came at a cost…

Because, in a paradoxically un-revolutionary way, the Convention set great store by its material possessions: aerodromes included. For instance, it was common knowledge what happened to Budapest when its French air facilities were sabotaged by guerrillas. Now there was neither a Buda or a Pest beside the Danube, and the puppet ‘Revolutionary Protectorate of the Magyars’ was casting around for a new capital.

But Frankenstein had no such concerns: here wasn’t his homeland. Indeed, it could be said he no longer had such a thing. Here in Luxembourg —or anywhere else—he was free to look up at the crowded skies, drink in the scene, and be careless of consequences.

The Luxembourgeois saw things differently. They saw that wisdom lay in averting your eyes and cultivating your own garden whilst you still had one. Plus adopting the positive attitude of gladness it was only war-supplies the vessels above deposited on their soil, not bombs.

That culture of denial suited Frankenstein and playmates down to the ground—which, coincidentally, was also the direction most Luxembourgeois cast their gaze when they met foreign eyes.

All in all perfect conditions for a conspiratorial meeting: circumstances conspiring in their favour for once. Away from their hotel's walls-with-ears, surrounded by the devout coming in or out, plus the hucksters that preyed upon them, Luxembourg Cathedral was an answer to plotters' prayers.

The 'Belgian Secret Police' had been successfully left at the border. Frankenstein felt they were now free to worry about other things.

'Ready?' he asked, meanwhile pointing out some blameless gargoyle as if that was the topic of discussion.

'As we'll ever be,' replied Foxglove. And I still say it's a very bad idea…'

Ada playfully smacked her servant's arm.

'Oh, hush you!' she admonished, but gently by her standards. Lady Lovelace was thoroughly enjoying this lark. She kept checking her appearance in her powder compact mirror, making needless minor adjustments to hat or hair. This was her biggest transformation since rising from the grave and she was growing to like it.

'I wish you'd stop doing that,' said Julius. 'Try to act in role.'

Ada carried on regardless.

'Who's to say it isn't?' she countered sweetly.

A good point. Frankenstein moved on.

'You have all the baggage?' he asked Foxglove.

'All that you've permitted us, sir.'

'And the rest?'

'In the hotel privy pit, weighted down to sink.'

'Are you sure? No coat or trinket donated to charity?'

'At your insistence, sir, I resisted the urge.'

'Good. We must leave no trace here. And the hotel bill?'

'Paid in full, plus an generous gratuity.'

'Excellent.'

Lady Lovelace tutted.

'No it isn't. It's very un-excellent. That was waste. It's not as if we're ever coming back here…'

Frankenstein brooked no dissent. Here was his time and plan.

‘We leave no spoor and likewise no pursuit,’ he said magisterially. ‘We shall shortly have enough problems without risking an outraged innkeeper. His shrieks as he chased us down the street for a few francs would ruin all.’

Ada snorted scepticism.

‘And pray tell how he would recognise us? Eh? Eh?’

Another good point. She was full of them today just when they weren’t welcome. Best to cut things short before she made any more. Frankenstein tore up the rest of his intended mental check list.

Or almost all of it.

‘The pistols?’ he asked Foxglove.

‘Primed and loaded, sir. May I ask why, sir?’

Frankenstein drew himself up on his crutch, shifting weight onto his remaining free leg.

‘No, you may not. Enough said. Right then: come fly with me!’

Then off went the freshly-minted cripple and his companions, tip-tapping across the cobbles towards the aerodrome.

* * *

The beggar by the Cathedral door—who could really have done with a ‘coat or trinket’ from Foxglove, had the man’s generous inclinations been allowed play—was relieved soon after.

A second and even more afflicted indigent took his place and, in the space of all the levering up and grunting, an exchange of intelligence took place.

‘He mentioned flying,’ said the first to the second.

‘Alert Team two,’ said the second to the first before he left.

Then the new beggar settled down to some long hours of displaying (fake) sores, and importuning worshippers as they emerged from the Cathedral all pious minded. Professionalism aside, it was in his interest to be convincing. The surveillance master said he could keep any alms received.

* * *

‘Beggar One’ went and rattled his tin before a young couple and their child seated outside one of the cafes in Cathedral close.

‘Be off with you!’ said the husband sternly, to be plausible. Simultaneously, his ‘wife’ discreetly pinched her borrowed baby to make it cry. The other patrons had sympathy for the poor mite, plainly frightened by the dreadful old tramp. Under the barrage of general grumbling the couple had cover to hear his true purpose.

‘Twelve,’ said the beggar—pre-agreed code for the aerodrome—and shambled off before the police arrived.

Whilst madam calmed ‘her’ infant with kisses that induced ‘ahh…’s from the cafe clientele, father took off his bowler hat and fanned his face with it. Although it wasn’t that warm a day.

‘Twelve,’ said the team at the hotel window, who’d counted the bowler’s back and forths.

A care-worn man sitting at a desk well back into the room was not content.

‘Check,’ he ordered.

They observed again. As per instructions, the cafe signal was repeated after the agreed ‘message break’ (casual adjustment of a breast-pocket kerchief).

‘It’s the aerodrome,’ confirmed the window team.

Care-worn man was straightaway even more worn.

‘Amateur!’ he hissed—his heaviest rebuke. ‘Keep in code! You might have been seen. Lips can be read!’

Everyone present cringed and became even more eager to please. Jobs like this weren’t easy to come by, but were exceptionally easy to lose.

‘I’ll tell five to activate seven,’ said the most senior junior.

Care-worn man nodded, like that should be so obvious, and looked even sorrier to need to add:

‘And don’t forget eleven on stand-by.’

The rest left and Care-worn man, today’s surveillance supervisor, could relax, insofar as he ever did.

He hated having to wield the whip: his agents were like his children to him. Yet did not Scripture say ‘he who spares the rod hates his son’? And very often in his profession the penalty for carelessness was death. So, Care-worn man had to be stern out of the love he bore them

The back-up squad (that the departed team knew nothing of) now entered the room. They were older in the service: deceptively sleepy-eyed professionals.

‘He masquerades as a maimed man: a French hussar,’ Care-worn man briefed them. ‘One feigned empty sleeve, ditto a lost lower leg, plus a crutch and eye patch…’ He almost smiled, his closest approach to that expression for many months. ‘The work of civilians. Grossly overdone. The Swiss looks like the love-child of a patchwork Lazaran and Neo-Nelson!’

That nearly got a laugh, but it did no harm to be light hearted during simple missions, building up a bank balance of solace for the more frequent gruelling jobs.

‘The actual she-Lazaran is dolled up as a cantiniére. Not familiar with the term? Well, you are excused: only in the French army could it happen. The wives and whores of the regiment have their own uniform: a delightful red, white and blue creation: skirt and pantaloons. Plus a sweet black bonnet with a red feather stuck in it. I doubt you could miss her, even if you tried…’

He realised he’d digressed too far, sounding almost human.

‘And her flunky is dressed as… a French flunky. Or so they delude themselves. Remember they have their oh so humorous carte de sejour, courtesy of the Belgians. William Tell indeed! Plus false French papers purchased in the town. I instructed the forger who made them to provide top quality examples: they will pass muster. And they have weapons. The Swiss is free and easy about using them. Watch that.’

Care-worn man waited for a nod from each to signify they understood. All were armed, but experienced enough to realise that real skill lay in never firing a shot.

‘Insofar as we can guess their intent our Master thinks they’ll be thwarted. But either way pleases us. Now go.’

Care-worn man wished he had a glass of wine to toast his charges with as they went; off—yet again—at his bidding to face mad people in a world gone mad. However, alcohol, or indeed any indulgence, during a mission would have been that awful thing: unprofessional. It skewed judgement and urged impulses even on those who’d won life’s most difficult struggle: namely to control their own thoughts.

More to the point, Prince Talleyrand would not have smiled upon it—and in the intelligence field no more need be said.

Soon the clear-up team would take over the building to remove the slightest trace he'd ever been there, but meanwhile Care-worn man had a moment for reflection.

Surely he would get to crack a bottle of red one day? Was that really too much to ask? Perhaps there'd be opportunity during retirement (if he made it), or on his twenty-first birthday: whichever came sooner.

Sooner the better.

Chapter 22: COME FLY WITH ME

Julius spruced himself up—and found that wasn't so easy with only one free hand. So, acting the part, he instructed Foxglove to adjust his busby and straighten his pelisse.

The little interlude, so natural seeming of a maimed but still dapper hussar, proud of his uniform and wounds gained in his country's service, gave him opportunity to size up the aerodrome concourse. Again. This was his third survey on three successive days—though the first two had been in another persona.

Nothing had changed. Access to this public part was promiscuous, but beyond was an entirely different (and yet the same old) tale. National Guardsmen controlled the narrow entrance to 'airside,' as exclusive and hard to attain as the gates of Paradise. Papers were being demanded even of high ranking soldiers. Beyond them, just visible beyond the lattice barricade, civilian heavies kept a beady eye before yet another line of passport control. After that there was distant sight of the galloon pylons and windmill dynamos.

And Julius had heard entry control at 'arrivals' in France was even stricter! Hence the second and madder-still phase of his plans.

Meanwhile, there were more than enough concerns to occupy the present moment. French law (or more accurately, power) ran the show here, and, though technically on Luxembourg sovereign soil, foreign rules pertained. Tight rules, straight out of the desiccated mind of Police Minister Fouché.

Everyone, Frankenstein included, had heard of the legendary control the Convention exerted over its citizens in order to remain in power, but it was still impressive—and daunting—to see it in action. Julius wondered if it was strictly necessary, now that the Convention's internal enemies were all either Lazarans or definitively dead. There was even word that the vast 'Civic Virtue' re-education camps were closing for lack of business. If so, perhaps the Revolutionary government was now just making a point to keep things that way.

Whatever the reason, only serving soldiers got on to French galloons, and even then only those who strictly needed to. Except that Julius had

heard one sentimental exception was made. A blind eye was turned towards those whose sacrifices to the People's cause rendered travel difficult.

He lurched forward to the booking cabin, making a show of the stick that bore him and of pain bravely borne.

Deep joy! He had deceived. The military clerk stood and saluted.

'Monsieur?'

'Three tickets to Paris, if you please. The first available flight.'

'Your papers, please monsieur.'

The clerk read them.

'Tell? William Tell?'

'Yes,' said Julius Frankenstein.

'No!' protested Ada, less loud than she first intended, but still audible.

Julius had promised her he'd use their French papers, and right up to that moment he'd truly intended to. But the name on those had never really appealed to him, and, besides, were too easily forgotten. The instant Frankenstein arrived at the desk mischievous voices in his head (perfect mimics of his own voice) had spoken to him. Worse still, he'd listened.

The clerk looked up. ''No?' he enquired, after Ada.

Julius dismissed the protest as of no account.

'My New-citizen sister fears flying,' he said, adopting impatient tones. 'Once we are in the waiting area I will beat her until she calms down.'

The clerk approved. He'd often wanted to do that to passengers.

Ada shut up and looked Lazaran-fashion hang-dog, apparently resigned to less-than-nothing status and taking to the skies.

Frankenstein's new name was checked against a big book of undesirables and, of course, found absent—since William Tell's insubordinate acts ended centuries ago.

That established, money changed hands and tickets were married to documents. 'Mr Tell' lurched off with his human baggage in tow.

'William'/Julius was looking forward to a cup of coffee. It would invigorate him for (belatedly) explaining to Lady Lovelace and Foxglove his true plans. That he didn't look forward to.

It all hinged on whether he could convince them of the legendary tightness of French entry control. And that therefore they'd be hijacking a galloon rather than just catching one like normal people.

If they swallowed that he'd go on to explain it was a childhood dream of his to command a galloon, and he could only thank Lady Lovelace for

driving him on to realise it. Then, he'd outline his revised intentions for France, on the off-chance they'd succeed and survive. He had in mind wine and peace and a period of cloud-counting in a French village—whose name would not be vouchsafed to Ada. And when, probably after five minutes or so, he grew sick of that, he foresaw a further change of identity and enlistment in one of Neo-Napoleon's 'Foreign Legions.' But Madam Lovelace would never know the upshot of that because they'd have long since parted company by then…

Finally, when all was said and done and confessed, coffee-cup still in hand in the departure lounge, he would wish his companions 'a nice life.' Goodbye rather than au revoir.

But before that exciting prospect there awaited the steely-eyed soldiers round the gate. The spiked barrier blocking it was never lifted till they'd given each passenger their seal of approval.

Not everyone was spoken to but Frankenstein merited a word. And a salute, which boded well.

'Been in the wars, eh? said the one with the best pressed uniform and most luxuriant 'Old Guard' style moustache. All these sentinels was imitating, and maybe aspiring to join, that elite regiment. 'Best-pressed' was the first amongst equals.

Julius had prepared an entire alternative life story, spending a very pleasant afternoon constructing it in his room with history book and bottle of wine.

'Moscow, Tunis and Naples,' he said, successively touching truncated trouser leg, sleeve and eye-patch.

They were impressed: each had been big and bloody battles,—and better still, all victories.

'Well then,' mused Best-pressed, 'you must have served under Marshall Treffault…'

'No.'

'What: a veteran like you?' Best-pressed frowned. 'At Naples? Why not?'

'Because,' said 'Mr Tell,' 'there was no Marshall Treffault at Naples. Or Tunis. Or Moscow. In fact, I've never heard of any Marshall Treffault.'

Best-pressed smiled.

'Right answer. Because he never existed. Papers please…'

He perused the proffered carte de sejour, but not in any sceptical fashion. Frankenstein's hopes rose.

'A Swiss National, eh?'

That signified nothing. The Revolutionary cause, and then its conquests, had inspired or pressed men from all over Europe into the Convention's armed forces.

'That's right.'

'William Tell.'

More muffled jubilation. The name obviously rang no bells. Again, for Frankenstein ignorance was bliss. He gave thanks for defective educations. Gratitude lent his voice a certain flourish.

'At your—and the Revolution's—service, sir.'

A few more steps and he'd be free: free to indulge a long held fancy of directing a stately galloon through skies he had no business to be in. Or possibly ending the tedious succession of day after day in a blaze of glory.

Well-pressed was about to give his ill-informed blessing and wave them on. Until:

'No!'

It was Ada again, in a reprise of her little scene before the booking desk. Except that here it wouldn't be so little.

Julius leapt boldly into the deja vu.

'My—Lazaran—sister fears flying,' he started. 'Once we are in the…'

'No!' Ada repeated, and Julius' heart froze. He saw she was out of role, still a Lazaran because that was unalterable, but not 'Mademoiselle Tell' or any other subordinate guise any more. She was Lady Lovelace again, mistress of her own fate and all she surveyed. And, worse still, smiling.

Foxglove was impassive—but he was in on this. His eyes had just the slightest glitter when they locked with Frankenstein's.

So, it transpired that just like Julius they had their own surprise planned. A trump card played before Frankenstein could explode his own bombshell about hijacking. The fox had been outfoxed.

'He is not William Tell,' said Ada. 'Nor a hussar. Nor wounded. But Swiss, yes, we can grant him that much.'

No. The soldiers would grant him nothing except suddenly cold faces and broad hands upon his shoulder.

There was a ‘pepperbox’ revolver in Julius’ waistcoat pocket: eight bulky barrels of persuasion ready for use when aloft. Yet it had no relevance here on solid ground and surrounded. He’d be dead before fingers gripped the handle.

‘This is preposterous!’ he protested, and tried to stand up straight as best crutch and restraining hands allowed. ‘She’s mad-…’

Which was probably true and might have worked if he’d persisted, and bluffed better than any human had ever bluffed before. But far more likely was the loss of all dignity and the same result in the end anyway. Julius plumped for poise and silence.

He wasn’t even allowed that. A questing French hand detected his strapped up arm and ripped his pelisse open to reveal it. Thus encouraged, others located his doubled-up ‘missing’ leg. For the sake of completeness, even the eye-patch was ripped away. By then his gun had gone too.

Ada and Foxglove had taken a step back, putting distance between them and someone suddenly no longer of their company. The soldiers had permitted that, but wouldn’t smile on any further retreat. They had questions.

Like:

‘Who is he then?’

Ada looked at Julius and he at she. He could detect no bottom to the depth of her eyes or triumph.

‘I was about to say,’ she said. ‘He is Julius Frankenstein. Great-nephew of Victor Frankenstein, inventor of the Revivalist science. And therefore wanted throughout Europe. I suggest you arrest him. Your Government will reward you.’

Every uniform in earshot seemed to think that was an excellent suggestion and rushed to adopt it.

*** * ***

Care-worn man saw and heard all—from a safe distance.

As soon as Frankenstein was bundled away in chains he ordered each surveillance unit to stand down. For the moment they would drift back to the innocuous lives they lived when not needed.

Meanwhile, in his mind Care-worn man was already considering his report on the mission. For once he looked forward to the task—how sweet the words would flow!

He could tell Talleyrand all had gone well.

THE WAY OF THE WORLD: MISCELLANEOUS DOCUMENTS

Being a selection of divers documents and source material presented for the interested reader to peruse at leisure, while those impatient to resume the story may do so here.

*** * ***

From Decisive Battles of the Western World *by Sir Charles Oman (London, 1930)*

Volume II: 'The Second Battle of Agincourt, 1819'

'…defining moment of the Second French Revolution, fortuitously fought on ground hitherto famous for a crushing Gallic defeat. On this occasion, the ramshackle post-Revolutionary French army, reinforced by elements of the old Imperial *Grande Armée* and Revolutionary militia of dubious military worth, necessarily took up a defensive stance slightly to the north-west of the historical battlefield. They faced an overwhelmingly stronger Austro-Russian invading force augmented by French Royalist echelons returning from exile.

The defenders of French soil and the newly re-stated ideals of "Liberty, Egality and Fraternity" can have little dreamed that at the height of battle and on the cusp of what seemed like certain defeat.'

*** * ***

From the (pre-publication and unedited) Memoirs of Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington. *(Five volumes. London 1830.)*

'…certain defeat and serve them right, when I heard that the d*mned rebel Frenchies had finally turned to fight at the old field of Agincourt. Naturally, I rejoiced like any decent Englishman would, and made all haste to get my army over there to do their worst. The omens all looked d*mned good.

Omens? Stuff o’ nonsense! Never underestimate the stupidity of Johnny foreigner—especially ones called ‘count’ this or ‘duke’ that. As much use as a chocolate teapot the lot d*mned lot of them!

Well, with nigh 50,000 English troops—scum of the earth of course, but seasoned fighters—on the way to lend a hand you might have thought the blasted Austrian and Rusky dunderheads would have held back till we could combine our forces. It wasn’t as if we were across the ocean in China—our advance guard was less than half a day’s march off! We could have been there well before bad light postponed play!

But no, by G*d’s teeth and turban, they wouldn’t wait, d*mn their eyes! If you ask me my opinion, they didn’t want to share the glory. Bl**dy fools! Bl**dy foreigners!’

*** * ***

From Memoirs of the Arch-duke Franz-Joseph IV *(Vienna. 1863)*
Volume 1; ‘My Early Years and Tribulations’

‘…foreigners but welcome allies. A column of Russians was to our left: royal-blue clad grenadiers from Muscovy burning to punish the ungodly French who had dared to kill not one king but two! A cloud of Cossack riders with lance and bow (soldiers, it seemed to me, from another century), preceded and surrounded them. Horse artillery of the most modern kind trundled beside, making the scene gay with their jingling horse accoutrements.

Soon the French front line was driven back on their main body—or I should say *one* French line, for to our right were the gallant French royalists, smallest of our three converging army columns but by no means the least in zeal. Holy banners and relics went before them and they sang in joyful anticipation of battle.’

*** * ***

From: Because History Demanded It! Random Recollections of a Revolutionary *by Jean-Marie Martine (Parthenopian Republican Press, Naples, Year 1 [1870 old-style])*

number: Reaction personified; the armies of the Hapsburgs and Romanovs and pretend-French lickspittles of the Bourbon pretender. And the nearer they came the more confident and invincible they seemed and the more our spirit drained away. How could we, mere ragged volunteers armed only with Revolutionary fervour, prevail against these gloriously arrayed professionals, these same veteran troops who had previously defeated the tyrant Bonaparte, the greatest general of his age?

Our sole comfort was that our few were not pitted against even worst odds. Three mighty columns converged on us, it was true, but it could so easily have been four. In their sure expectation of victory and ancien-regime arrogance, the allies failed to wait for the English army, mere miles away and currently dashing in our direction with all the misplaced energy of that benighted nation.

However, little did they know—and nor did we—that a *fifth* column would decide the day.'

*** * ***

From: A Christian Philosopher in Arms—being the sacred and profane memoirs of Count Charles Bonhomme, Gendarme *(privately printed, Avignon, 1890)*

'…the day not be ours? It was inconceivable. As we neared the Atheists' line our brave warriors spontaneously quickened their pace, such was their hunger and thirst to reclaim the good name of Mother France, France the eternal, France the legitimate, seat of Kings and saints, loyal daughter of the Church!

Our officers could not contain this zeal. We zouaves were at the charge even before coming within rifle range. As for me, it was my plan to draw close to the cowardly barricade these king-killers skulked behind and then hurl over it the sacred regimental banner I bore. Thus I hoped to provoke and inspire my companions in arms to scale the fortification and rescue our flag, lest it be captured and our honour lost with it.

And if, God forbid, none should chose to follow me, well: I resolved to attack alone and earn earthly glory and a Heavenly crown via a martyr's death!

But then…'

* * *

From the transcript of the court martial of Captain-general Franz-Joseph IV, 1820 (unpublished; secure collection; Imperial Hapsburg Archive, Vienna)

'…but then I heard a babble of excited French voices —nothing unusual there, you may say—but these came not from the enemy to our front, but from our Gallic allies to one side. The babble swiftly turned into alarm, and then to cries of 'Treason! Treason!' and 'We are betrayed!'

Then they routed through us, bringing our good order into utter disorder. Very rapidly all was lost and the horrors of Hell unleashed onto the Earth.

Years have passed since but they have not been put back yet…'

* * *

From: a poster of the early Second Revolutionary period.

Pan-Europe Ephemera collection. Helsinki. 13th edition electronic catalogue 2008.

Undated but signed by "Auguste BLANQUI, First Citizen, President of the Society of Rights, First Amongst Equals, Provisional Chief commissioner of the Committee of Public Safety".

'EMERGENCY PROCLAMATION

CITIZENS—TO ARMS!

The enemy is at the gate! The kings return intending to drown France in blood!

Wherefore:

Order of the New Committee of Public Safety number 1:

A GRAND MOBILISATION en-mass is decreed. All males between the ages of 12 and 60 shall report to their local Revolutionary prefecture for arms and enrolment and then rendezvous at the Revolutionary Army camp at Paris.

Order of the New Committee of Public Safety number 2:

The ban on Revivalism and Frankensteinian science is hereby suspended until further notice.

Order of the New Committee of Public Safety number 3:

All Revivalist technicians are hereby conscripted into state service until further notice.

All graveyards, mortuaries, chapels of repose and recent cadavers are hereby sequestered to state use.

LONG LIVE THE SOVEREIGN PEOPLE!

DEATH TO ALL KINGS!

DEATH TO DEATH!'

*** * ***

From the (pre-publication and unedited) Memoirs of Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington. *Five volumes. London 1830.*

'…death to continue. What little I could gather from the sheep-like survivors of the confounded debacle suggests a horde of d*mned Revolutionary Frenchies, living and otherwise, poured into the exposed Allied army flank, catching the over-confident blighters by surprise. Led by that Blanqui fellow we should have hung when we had the chance during the Occupation. Which only goes to show you the great folly of milk-and-water moderation. Dead men do no mischief, that's what I say! If you see what I mean. It always *was* the case before that d*mn Frankenstein fellow's meddling. Save in Christ's case—but I digress.

Be that as it may, couple everything with our 'gallant' allies not having seen so many undead before and you can almost forgive the foreigners running. Almost. They said the Lazaran undead were all frenzied up and ripping men to shreds…

Well, your brittle continental type soldier can't stomach such stuff and they turned and run so fast a whippet couldn't catch 'em! By the time we turned up it was an absolute bl**dy shambles. Had to fight our way off the battlefield and all the way to the coast, harassed all the time by Lazarans you needs must hack to bits to get them off you. One bit the throat out of my horse as I sat on it: dashed impudence! I was quite fond of the beast. And my personal *aide de camp got* eaten—which was a devil of a job explaining to his mother. I thought she'd never stop blubbing.

Eventually, we got to some God-forsaken hole called Dunkerque and the d*mned Navy, better late than never, blasted the beach until there was

space to take us off. But permit me to inform you, it was a confounded close run thing…'

*** * ***

From Decisive Battles of the Western World *by Sir Charles Oman (London, 1930)*

Volume II: 'The Second Battle of Agincourt, 1819'

'…close run thing but elements of the Allied army fought their way out to fight another day. Nevertheless, the victory of 'Second Agincourt' was so resounding that not only did it guarantee French independence and the survival of the proto-Conventionary regime, but also gave birth to a remarkable elan which carried the Revolutionary (and predominately undead) armies to Vienna, Rome, Athens, Cairo and beyond, in an unstoppable tide. Burdened by Papist prejudices against similar mass use of 'Lazaran' legions, the opposing continental powers struggled to maintain their own borders, let alone counter the Revolutionary threat.

Indeed, for some while after even the shores of Great Britain were not immune from Lazaran "new-citizen" incursions and the likelihood of full-scale invasion. Only reluctant recourse to Revivalism, albeit less promiscuous than across the Channel, served to flesh out (if the reader will excuse the term) Albion's defences sufficient to preserve its freedom

Meanwhile, on the continent, the French conquests acquired such an extent as to merit the name of Empire, but blushing to term it so, the Revolutionary Convention was pleased to call its realm the "New Civilisation".

Such is the vanity and self-deceit of rulers. However, to those, living and dead, who laboured under the yoke of that "civilisation", it seemed like a fresh Dark Age had descended.'

CIVIL SERVICE SELECTION BOARD

JOINT HOME OFFICE & FOREIGN OFFICE
FAST STREAM EXAMINATION—PAPER 1

To be held at the Banqueting Hall, Westminster Palace, at 10.00 a.m. sharp on the 13th day of February in the Year of Our Lord Eighteen hundred and thirty-five, also the 5th Year of the reign of His Gracious Majesty, William IV, King of Great Britain and the Dominions, Protector of the French Realm, Guardian of the Gate to Life, Defender of the Faith & etc.

TIME ALLOWED: 3 HOURS.

No candidate will be permitted entrance more than five minutes after commencement. No hounds or servants or family members may accompany any candidate. No Lazarans likewise. All books, paperwork and such and weaponry must be lodged with the invigilators upon pain, if detected, of exclusion and failure—without exception. All candidates shall first provide the doorman with proof of vitality by a pricking of the (visible) skin and production of blood, or else a surgeon's note authenticated by a public notary that day.

CANDIDATES FOR THE FOREIGN OFFICE MUST ANSWER AT LEAST TWO QUESTIONS FROM SECTION A, AND AT LEAST ONE QUESTION EACH FROM BOTH SECTIONS B & C. CONVERSELY, HOME OFFICE (INCLUDING SECRET SERVICE) CANDIDATES MUST ANSWER AT LEAST TWO QUESTIONS FROM SECTION B AND AT LEAST ONE QUESTION EACH FROM BOTH SECTION A & C.

Examination scripts contrary or superfluous to the above instructions will be entirely disregarded. THE EXAMINERS' WORD IS FINAL.

SECTION A—MODERN HISTORY

1. Outline the main events of the Second French Revolution from either:

'The Massacre of Mons' to 'Second Agincourt.' OR: Establishment of the Conventionary Government to 'The People's Declaration of Eternal War.'

2. 'The Allies' occupation of France 1816-18 prompted legitimate grievances leading to the Second French Revolution. Foremost amongst them were reparations and the veto on Frankensteinian Science.' Demolish this outrageous farrago.

3. Identify the main phases of the PROMETHEAN WAR, either:

1820—1828 OR:

1830—date.

Further, identify three signs of France’s inevitable defeat.

4. The precise date of Buonaparte’s revival by the Godless French regime may be precisely identified through examination of their conduct of the war. Discuss in relation to the so-called ‘Great Breakthrough’ and the ‘Month of Marching’ which followed it.

SECTION B—HOME AFFAIRS & POLITICAL DISCOURSE

1. Temporary suspension of Habeas corpus and other sundry antique and impertinent laws has been the salvation of the British Nation. What arguments would you muster against those unpatriotic elements who opine otherwise?

2. The thrust of English Foreign policy is to deny continental European hegemony to any one power. Can you conceive of any circumstances by which the French regime might be our ally in this cause?

NB.All answers will be considered purely hypothetical. The terms of the 1818 ‘Treachery Within The Realm Act’ shall not apply.

3. You are a Grade 7 Local Government Major General in England. An anti-Revivalist agitational group is established in your area. What administrative and/or coercive actions would you take to liquidate it, assuming said group comprised:

Item: Gentry and members of the quality, OR:

Item: Papists, OR:

Item: Quakers or other nonconformist Protestants, OR:

Item: French exiles.

4. Outline the Anglican Church’s evolving accommodation with Frankensteinian Revivalist Science 1800—1823, up to and including the Council of Tintern. Illustrate your answer by reference to specific synods and encyclicals.

NB1. No reference need be made to Papist intransigence.

NB2. No reference need be made to the untimely but unquestionably accidental demise of Archbishop Butt.

SECTION C—APPLIED PHILOSOPHY

1. The French Conventionary Government’s promiscuous use of the Revived for its military and agricultural and industrial workforce is motivated by:

Item: The exhaustion of French manpower by forty years of war, OR:

Item: The wicked and atheistic nature of the regime.

To which of these explanations do you primarily subscribe and why?

2. ‘Revolutions or the fear of revolutions had more to do with the dissolution of the Holy Alliance against France than the Battle of Second Agincourt.’ Discuss Gibbon’s cynical and fatuous contention.

3. Prince Talleyrand said that the restored Bourbon monarchy had both ‘forgotten and learnt nothing. Against stupidity even the Almighty struggles in vain.’ Discuss this d*mnable slander on legitimist principles.

4. Outline the 10 (ten) main ethical objections to Lazaran legal rights and acquisition of legal personality by the Revived. Would a Revived monarch undermine rights of succession? Is the Revived Incan monarchy ‘utterly illegitimate and unholy’ as Pope Leo XX brazenly declared?

*** * ***

Regulations for Scholars of Trinity College, Oxford, as revised, reissued and delivered of the Master and Proctors, this Year of Grace 1834.

‘Stricture number the 314th: no undergraduate shall retain in College any animal, excepting with permission ONE hound, ONE hawk, ONE horse, donkey or mule or other beast of conveyance. Nor shall any scholar feed and sustain any other such creature, whether wild or tame, two or four-legged, as their particular pet. Ratters shall be maintained by the College and no other party. The definition of ‘animal,’ ‘pet,’ and ‘ratter’ shall be at the entire discretion of the Master. Loss of one or more limb shall not preclude any beast from inclusion in the category of two or four-legged. BEARS are zealously excluded from all aspects of College life, regardless of Lord Byron’s precedent.

‘Stricture number the 315th: no undergraduate shall be attended by more than TWO Lazarans as his body servants or protectors, their given names to be supplied in writing to the proctors before the commencement of term in which residence begins. Excepting peers of the Realm who may be attended by up to FOUR undead. To avoid scandal and vice all Lazaran retainers shall be demonstrably MALE—this fact to be self-evident without need of disrobing.

Such permitted attendants are to be entirely fed, clothed and ordered by their master. They shall wear adequate apparel at all times, said apparel to prominently display both their given name and that of their master. The College shall have the entire prerogative to dispose of any Lazaran that

offends against decency, public sensitivities, the statutes of Trinity or the law of England. Undergraduates are not permitted to exercise capital punishment upon any Lazaran in their charge in accordance with the stipulations above, save with the express permission of the College authorities. All such condign penalties shall be exacted upon the College gallows ONLY.

‘Stricture number the 316th: No whore-mongering shall be permitted. Neither shall any undergraduate avail himself of more than ONE bottle of fortified wine before morning divine service or TWO before evensong, unless…’

PART TWO: LIFE

(From the 'Provincial News' page of The Daily Sans-Culotte, *Paris departement edition, 2nd Thermidor, Year 13.)*

ANTI-CITIZENS APPREHENDED

Intelligence is received from the village of Vertillac, near Bergerac, that a cell of counter-revolutionaries has been detected red-handed in the practice of its iniquities. Readers can be straightaway reassured that these sub-humans in mortal guise were speedily liquidated according to the enlightened norms of Revolutionary justice.

However, the shocking facts as reported by our Bordeaux Department correspondent merit relating for their instructional value.

Burial

It appears that a citizen by the name of Charles Dubois, a farrier by trade, died of the ague in his nineteenth or twentieth year. His carcass (he being in life a well-made and robust fellow) was duly required by the People in order to rise again and serve as a New-Citizen.

However, mired in rustic backwardness, his parents and young wife conspired to give Dubois wasteful burial, compounding their crimes by commissioning illegal 'Christian' rites. Lying words were put about that rapid putrefaction had set in, making Revival impossible.

Grenade

Vigilant village Commissioner for Public Virtue, Victor Guadet, was not deceived. Acting on information, he led a force of Revolutionary Marshals to the secret midnight interment and ventured seizure of the corpse.

Disgusting to relate, force was offered against his lawful acts and injuries inflicted on both sides. Worse still, a grenade had, with evil forethought, been placed atop the coffin for just such an eventuality. When detonated it forever denied the People

the continued service of Charles Dubois (deceased) and Commissioner Guadet likewise.

Immortal

Arrests were made of the surviving counter- revolutionaries, including the dead man's parents and spouse. After swift Tribunal hearings sentence was executed in Bergerac before a large and appreciative audience.

The family Dubois have taken their son's place and now march as cleansed New-Citizens in the service of our great cause! Their former names shall be blotted out forever from the immortal roll-call of the People!

Therefore harken oh citizens! Read and learn to your education and benefit: the Revolution is not thwarted in this life or beyond the grave!

Chapter 1: A DAY IN THE LIFE OF JULIUS FRANKENSTEIN (2).

For symmetry's sake he started keeping a diary of captivity again. The day the two letters arrived it would have said.

'Same. Petit déjeuner. Pretend to do research. Drink. Bed.'

The regime at the Grand Mausolée de Compiégne was less liberal than the Heathrow Hecatomb's—incredible as that might seem. There was no need to send any Gallic equivalent of Sir Percy Blakeney to give Frankenstein a rocket for his lack of discoveries. Every single day he had to interact with Coventionary overseers: rough revolutionaries with no respect, and no manners; and not the slightest delicacy when they bristled their great moustaches and said what they thought of him. Each day he thought of killing one with his bare hands and getting it over with.

What stopped him was sure knowledge of the consequences. There was a guillotine facility in the central yard which saw daily use. After a travesty of a 'tribunal' they'd slice his head off. Within the hour both he and the man he killed would be stitched up and in the storage vats waiting to be reborn.

Conventionary Revivalist science was neither neat nor painstaking. They had no time for refinements. Their wars and purges and policy of 'perpetual terror' both demanded and supplied a massive flow of 'New-citizens.' Accordingly, under that ceaseless pressure Compiegne's standard products made even the worst Heathrow 'patchwork job' looked polished. Frankenstein had seen women's—even girls'—heads on male bodies, and recycled battle casualties so battered only mummy-style coiled bandages kept them whole. And in his case, if he transgressed they'd be in vengeful mood. God alone knew what freak-show they'd revive him as.

The danger was, that though his gaolers might be coarse as coal-bunkers in their studied way, some had the subtlety of torturers too. They sensed his particular fears and played upon them.

'If you do go,' they crowed (and 'go' in the Compiegne context meant one thing only: to the meat vats), 'we'll make sure you get extra serum. Just

so that afterwards you’re aware.’

They really meant it. They laughed about it and chatted about that happy prospect over their evening bottle. They brought him especially botched examples of their handiwork and made them dance for him.

For a sad fact was starting to dawn on the Convention as it had on the English. Frankenstein was not the find they thought they’d made, and all he shared with his genius great-uncle was a surname. He’d been given his own mini Promethean facility but what emerged from it could just as well have rolled off the main production line, and with only half the time and trouble. The daily moustache-bristling grew ever more insolent.

Therefore, the sole promising option Julius had left to consider was escape—and the ball and chain about his ankle forced him to be realistic on that score.

So, he secured extra days with cunning. The bloody-hysteria-as-standard of the Mausoleum meant that his guardians were busy men and liable to distraction. When their attention wavered Frankenstein stole and stored exceptional body parts like robust torsos and thick-hewed limbs. Bribes and threats to lowly carters and ‘Charon-men’ also secured him first pick of any grenadier or guardsman that came in. Accordingly, in moments of crisis he could revive a sturdy New-citizen soldier twice as good as the ramshackle basic product. He’d explain it with mumbo-jumbo about ‘vascular enhancement’ or ‘muscle augmentation,’ (largely made up on the hoof) and the ‘Quality Control’ auditors would be sufficiently intrigued to give him a little while longer. But when stocks failed and he couldn’t directly repeat the trick those same old doubts about him spread. The dreadful day inched nearer.

The Revolution had its own special version of redundancy, notified via a sharp descending blade, and made all the more fearful by surprise. One day a man might be at his desk and the next he was gone and not to be mentioned again.

As motivational regimes went, it worked well. The Convention had long ago observed that fear made far better citizens than love.

*** * ***

Julius was still in good enough grace with the management to receive full rations. *Petit déjeuner* consisted of bread and sausage and a carafe of wine. Granted, the baguette was gritty *pain de guerre*, the sausage dubious and wine already dilute, but it counted as haute cuisine in a nation at continual war with itself or others for four decades.

Julius ate it mechanically, without pleasure, merely as a means of strength for another day, whilst trying not to think of the vile rumours circulated about what went into the sausage.

Before being perverted to its current usage, the Mausoleum had been a chateau, and quite a grand one. The usual thing had happened to its owners when the ‘mobile columns’ of the Second Revolution surged out into the countryside, and a few of their of their skulls remained perched on prominent architectural features.

After that the history of the place grew obscure and Frankenstein didn’t enquire too closely. It wouldn’t have been wise even if he’d actually wanted to know. The Convention didn’t care for too much dwelling on the past, holding it to be a symptom of reactionary tendencies—an invariably fatal disease. Suffice then to say that a succession of notables made the place their commandeered home as they rose and then fell in the bloody cauldron of revolutionary struggle. Often it all happened too quick for them to even take possession or enjoy much more than a weekend there. None left an impression, save for some bloodstains on the walls during contested evictions.

Then finally, when the chateau had become ill-omened and dilapidated enough to excite no one’s envy, the ‘Peoples’ Promethean Brigade’ arrived to stay. Beforehand, the unit had been in Paris itself, close to the guillotines and source of supply, but there’d been too many escapes and scandalous sights for the capital of a regime with a keen sense of its own dignity. Therefore, the Convention’s central committee (who’d recently deified ‘Reason’ as the State religion), deemed it reasonable to move things to less sensitive surrounds, a bit nearer the Front. There were already trains of wagons carrying the condemned from prison to Madame Guillotine, and so it took only minor administrative adjustments for them to press on a bit further and ferry the finished product to the Mausoleum.

Those wagon trains had been rolling for a decade now. There’d been ample time to purge the town of Compiegne of reactionary objectors, and restock it with patriots and Mausoleum workers and their families. Now the

whole locality was predicated on Promethean science and thus rather prosperous, in a grim sort of way.

Or so Frankenstein had heard, because he hadn't actually ever seen the place, having arrived by night and in a sealed coach under escort. The Mausoleum's gate slammed shut behind him and there he'd stayed ever since, as quarantined from normal life as if moved to the Moon. For, in its ten years of operation, there'd been opportunity to erect multiple high walls right round the former Chateau, both to keep 'New-citizens' in and prying eyes out. Therefore, all Julius could view now as he ate his breakfast sitting before high (barred) windows was a rumour of forest: a few tree-tops glimpsed over the fortifications, plus smoke columns from where the chimneys of Compiegne must be.

Other than that there was only sky to study—and the sincere wish to fly into it—whether in a galloon or on angel's wings didn't much matter.

It was quiet there as soon as (like all hardened Promethean scientists) you ceased to hear the continual Lazaran-lament. Similar to its English counterpart, the Mausoleum functioned in too much of a rush to get round to fitting steam-driven devices throughout. Instead, use was made of the muscle-power of its myriad reject products to make conveyor belts turn and serum-spears descend. They toiled for free, didn't require coal to function, and when they finally broke down were readily replaced without recourse to mechanics. It… worked, by and large, and that sufficed.

Elsewhere, in less streamlined parts of Europe, scholars criticised Revivalist science's sedative effect on all other fields of technological progress. They said that exploiting Lazaran power was like the mass slavery of Classical Times, removing the incentive for innovation. And as for its effect on public morals…!

But the Convention didn't give a fig for what ivory-towered academics or theologians might think. Let them burble on, peddling 'morality' for their masters. The Revolution would get to their sleepy hollows sooner or later, and then there'd be an end to such idealist nit-picking…

Meanwhile, back in the Mausoleum and present, in his desperate casting about for positive developments Julius looked on the bright side. At least the absence of machines made for comparative tranquillity—so long as you were careful where you looked. Get that wrong and even silence wasn't 'tranquil.'

Frankenstein exercised great care, but 100% avoidance was never going to happen. Not there. For instance, there'd been a batch brought in the day before that were either victims of a lynch mob (nothing unusual in stressed and starving Revolutionary France) or else grapeshot from massed artillery (ditto). The carts held what looked more like off-casts from an autopsy than coherent corpses.

So, no—only by raising one's eyes to Heaven (and pinching one's nostrils) could you construct the delusion of living in a place where humans lived—that is to say real humans living real life. The tops of the Chateau's tall towers (out of bounds to him) and clouds passing by in their eternal journey (likewise) conspired to bolter the notion. If he determinedly thought of nothing else they would metaphorically bear him aloft and above all this for… minutes on end.

Today Fate begrudged him even those minutes. Footsteps on the stairs to his door called him back to earth. He heard and hated them.

With good reason. Hobnails. It could only be one of the Mausoleum moustaches, here to upbraid him—or worse. Or perhaps that long anticipated moment had arrived and nemesis was approaching his door. A sudden strong premonition told him it might be the latter.

Frankenstein considered this and took a possibly last sip of wine. Fittingly, it was acid.

How much did he care? About that or anything?

Not much came the answer—so long as leaving this world was quick. And neat. And dignified. Which he knew to be asking a great deal. Too much probably, especially in present circumstances.

So then: goodbye cruel world—and damn your eyes!

Frankenstein dismissively clicked his fingers at existence—but the visitor took that as summons and entered.

It transpired Julius had libelled life without cause. It was not 'that moment.' Nor nemesis. Quite the opposite in fact.

A Mausoleum messenger stood before him, bearing letters that would save his life, not end it.

Chapter 2: R.S.V.P.

‘My dearest Julius,’ said the first letter, in a familiar wild hand.

> ‘How are you? How go your researches? Any news?
> From your most fervent and true friend,
> Lady Ada Augusta Lovelace, nee Byron.
> xxx’

Frankenstein’s first reaction? He didn’t know how she had the nerve. Then a second’s reflection reminded him he knew all too well. Their history together should have led him to expect nothing else.

A sudden acid storm sloshed around his stomach, taking him to the verge of nausea. The sheer gall of the woman!

‘Any reply, *monsieur*?’

The messenger had waited, temporarily invisible to Julius.

‘What?’

‘Do you wish to reply, *monsieur*? There is opportunity. The man who delivered it awaits.’

Julius sucked his lips.

‘Well, that depends,’ he answered eventually. ‘Do you have a loaded gun to hand?’

Messenger took that as a no and departed.

Frankenstein crossed to the french windows of his cell cum quarters cum workplace. Sure enough, far down the drive of the Compeigne Mausoleum, just visible through the bars, beyond the gates and guards, waited a black coach. Before it stood a man who was almost certainly Foxglove, starring up at Frankenstein’s new home.

You had to hand it to them. Or her. If you didn’t hand it to her she’d snatch it anyway. Lady Lovelace had got in! She’d slipped away from the aerodrome kerfuffle and entered by some other means. Probably it was long arranged in advance and the whole galloon business—maybe all their post-Channel plans—a mere humouring of him. She must have been waiting for the first encounter with French authority in strength: a scenario with no prospect of shooting your way out. If they’d chanced to have been shipwrecked on a French rather than Belgian beach it would have happened

then. Whichever way the dice fell, the outcome was pre-determined. Julius would be led up the garden path like a dumb beast with no understanding, to be delivered to the butcher.

Bile was mountaineering up his throat. He had to gag and try to think of other things. It proved impossible.

All manner of loose ends now meshed and locked into place. Disparate parts became an understandable whole. A sickening picture. Or perhaps a puppet show, starring Dr. Julius Frankenstein, singing and dancing without dignity to someone else's tune.

For a second, if he'd had that hypothetical gun, he would have used it on the distant coach. Or maybe hurtled down the drive with it to get right up close and make sure of the job.

Of course, teeming soldiery would have stopped him long before he was within sniffing distance of escape or vengeance, but it would still be cathartic. The visible working out of his inmost thoughts.

Yet if that wasn't on, it was always possible to take remote revenge. He could have the pleasure of denouncing Ada as she had him. One word, one raising of the alarm, was all it would take to have Mausoleum security all over that coach like rampant pox.

They'd find an Englishwoman—and an aristocrat to boot. An illegal. Someone who'd barged into a society where all things not compulsory were forbidden. Probably an expendable Lazaran spy they'd conclude, one of the rare sentient sort. The secret police would have a field day! Fouché's men had their own 'interrogation facilities' in the Mausoleum, as they did in every state building. Julius sometimes heard the screams from them at night.

The chilling remembrance of which turned Frankenstein to another option. A wholly irresponsible and therefore highly tempting alternative.

It remained open to him to answer the impudent message. To re-engage with mad Ada. To replay their relationship a second time—and this time to play it better…

Her coach still awaited. The Mausoleum messenger could be summoned back to deliver a reply

Which would say… what?

How am I? Answer: a prisoner, as before. In a Gallic mirror image of the Heathrow Hecatomb.

How goes my researches? They do not. They cannot. Which my captors must soon perceive.

And any news? No, no, no, no!

Or possibly… yes.

Julius suddenly recalled that the messenger had delivered two letters. The second lay in still virgin state whilst shock and outrage and multiple beckoning ways distracted him.

And betrayed him almost. The road of life forked. If Frankenstein had acted in haste and gone to her he might never have known there was a counter offer. A offer that blew Ada's clean out of the water.

*** * ***

It was short but, when interpreted, sweet.

'Mon Chère Frankenstein'

it read, in careless, V.I.P.'s hand. Then:

'?'

Then:

'N'

You could legitimately have commissioned a conference of scholars to decipher it, timidly exploring the multiple pathways of possible meaning till they were all set out, ready for rational conclusions to be made. Alternatively, you could, as Frankenstein did, shoulder aside all those imaginary academics and make an intuitive leap of faith over their gleaming heads. The end result was probably the same but with the added attraction of being stylish—and a lot quicker.

Since Frankenstein was a man in a hurry he happily took the short route. He also took up paper and pen and he wrote:

'Mon Chère General
!

JF’

Chapter 3: MOUSTACIOED ELOPEMENT

In doing so Frankenstein sensed he'd passed a test. If he'd identified his correspondent correctly they were looking for someone who, when travelling from A to Z, wasn't scared to skip B—Y. His cryptic response should be spot on. Granted, it was a lie, but that was only an issue for someone not already far from God's favour.

His way out was made easy for him. On the envelope there was, in another, more clerkish, hand, a return address: one of the myriad numbered postal 'caches' serving every Government purpose from the sublime to the sinister. To interfere with anything so sanctioned was a capital offence (like almost everything else in Conventionary France). Dumped in the Messengers' office 'out' sack for tomorrow, alongside many others, a missive thus addressed would not invite notice or scrutiny.

Julius rejoiced and reached for another glass of wine—even the sour stuff they served at the Mausoleum. He'd found a conduit to the outside world through which news of his continued existence might crawl! Would he take it? He most certainly would!

By contrast, any reply to Ada's plea needed subtle gymnastics (surely a contradiction in terms…) to reach her. He'd missed the chance to put a message in Foxglove's hands and there was no way of knowing when or if another would arrive. All outbound letters to conventional addresses such as Lady Lovelace's lodgings (wherever they might be) would be opened, poured over and censored to the point of death, if not beyond. And never more so than in the case of their intrinsically untrustworthy foreign 'volunteer.' That sure knowledge (plus absence of anyone to write to) was what had 'inspired' Julius to writer's block so far.

Today he let it deter him again. Answering Ada would only bring a hornets' nest of trouble down around her pale pretty head, and whilst that had a certain appeal, Julius didn't doubt a matching nest would be found for him too. Far better then to inflict on her the lesser torment of silence and unknowing. For a while, perhaps a long while, let her seethe in rented accommodation waiting for a word from him. It would do her spiritual good and also serve her right!

Having absorbed what both letters had to say, Frankenstein tore them into digestible strips and proceeded to eat his words. They weren't noticeably worse than the rest of breakfast…

* * *

The inwardly digested letters hadn't even passed through Frankenstein's system before his reply was replied to.

It took the unconventional form of a tap upon his window soon after midnight. Which was surprising in itself, since he resided on the first floor.

Even so, Frankenstein ignored it. He was turned on his side away from the window, just getting comfortable, half-asleep, and half-tipsy. And besides, odd night noises were the norm in the Mausoleum and none of them rewarded investigation.

Except that this one was insistent and unwilling to be snubbed. The rap upon his windowpane was repeated, but with more force. Then again, harder. Extrapolate the series but a few steps forward and the glass would shatter.

Not that Frankenstein cared greatly about that. One of the few pluses about his present abode was no requirement to pay for breakages. On the other hand, getting it repaired would take ages and much begging of surly artisans. Meanwhile, a draught would whistle through. On balance, Julius decided to turn over in bed.

His first bleary thought was that there was a new Man in the Moon. Then returning consciousness clarified that. Handily silhouetted against the full moon was a man's face, masked and urgent. He raised his fist, clearly threatening to put it through the window.

Of course, Frankenstein had been searched and disarmed long before he ever got to the Mausoleum. Now he was left without so much as a letter-opener with which to defend himself. However, in present circumstances, gravity offered itself as his salvation. The man must be perched atop a long ladder. If he proved to be an unwelcome guest it would be easy to end their conversation by sending him back down the quick way. But for that Julius needed to arise.

Arranging his night-gown into decency, Frankenstein crossed over and inserted his arms through the bars to raise the sash window.

In these present strange days, the first thing you determined in any encounter was ‘are they living or not?’ That fundamental fact determined all subsequent intercourse, outranking even race or class. Society had Victor Frankenstein to thank for that

His great-nephew checked. All the vital signs were there. The visitor lived and breathed. Burst capillaries on his cheeks flushed red with life-giving blood.

Satisfied on that score, but still poised to launch the man into space, Julius addressed him.

‘Good evening, *monsieur*. How are you this fine evening? Ah…’

A splendidly stylish start but spoilt by the ensuing feeble exclamation.

For Frankenstein’s scrutiny had moved on to take in finer details. Beneath the black mask spouted a moustache of extra special luxuriousness. And in turn beneath that was an extra confident smile—of a kind unbefitting an ladder-trapped intruder into a terrible place. Supporting both features was a frame of splendid martial bearing.

For the second day running Frankenstein made a sprightly leap from sparse facts to fascinating conclusions. Hence the ‘Ah…’

The visitor smiled, approving of something. Several crucial teeth were missing, creating a gravestone image highly appropriate to the location.

Finally the man spoke, in soldierly French. Their conversation was conveniently covered by shrieks and laments from the Lazaran pens, so constant as to be part of the aural scenery.

‘I’m well. And you, *monsieur*?’

In the interval, Julius had recovered his poise—never far from at hand.

‘Likewise. To what do I owe this pleasure? Are you an assassin?’

The visitor considered. Clearly it was a possibility.

‘Not tonight, *monsieur*. You were right first time with the ‘pleasure’ thing. My master requests the pleasure of your company.’

‘And who can blame him? Is it R.S.V.P.?

The visitor shook his head regretfully.

‘Not as such. More like ‘come now.’..’

Frankenstein deliberated for nearly a second.

‘Then I should be delighted.’

Another smile in response.

‘Very glad to hear it, *monsieur*. You’re a bit bulky to drag along unwilling. Thank you for making my job so much simpler.’

He waved to unseen friends in the darkness below. Further out in the courtyard Julius detected the stirring of bigger-than-human movement. Air displaced in a straight line from there to his window forced Frankenstein to notice cables attached to the bars.

‘I’d step away if I were you,’ said the visitor, starting to descend. ‘Take the opportunity to get dressed if you like. But don’t go too far…’

There was a team of cavalry mounts, Julius saw now, being roused into action against the metal grid imprisoning him. As his eyes acclimatised, aided by the moonlight, he detected more masked men, urging the horses on. There were yet more around the ladder’s base.

Frankenstein was about to pay tribute to all they’d so far achieved in silence, undetected in this heart of darkness, but then realised any words were redundant. Super-human was expected as standard in this regiment, and praise only cut in beyond that.

He retreated into the room and threw on some clothes. All his other possessions had been stolen, leaving him free as a monk to move on at a moment’s notice.

The cables braced, the bars buckled, the comparatively new (by the Chateau’s standards) mortar gave way.

This, thought Julius, was the moment when all would go wrong. The Mausoleum would awake in all its ghastly glory, including swarms of guards. But no: his callers had every point covered. Naturally, the bars made protest at being wrenched from home but they hit the ground with barely a sound, muffled by some pre-laid padding. No voice was raised to query events, no musket spat.

Yet there still ought to have been both. Discreet as the operation was, no horse can understand the need for total hush, nor will masonry and metal ever fully oblige. There was noise that the sentries should hear.

As he pulled on his boots Frankenstein waited for their intervention and the rip of bullets in the night. He waited in vain.

Having vacated the ladder’s summit to make way for the bars, the masked face appeared again, gesturing impatiently.

‘Courage, *monsieur*. I shall save you from falling…’

The implication of that worked better than threats. All Swiss are (or have to pretend to be) mountaineers. Frankenstein quit the room at speed, taking nothing, not even a rearward glance, and located the topmost rung

with one questing foot. Aiming to impress he descended swiftly; so swift as to catch up with the masked man and plant a foot upon his head.

‘*Monsieur*!’ the man protested. ‘Have a care! We do not have enough time to hurry…’

Reeling in that gnomic utterance occupied Frankenstein’s thoughts all the way to the gatehouse. En route, he was joined, one by one, by other masked conspirators, all moustachioed and confident as his initial visitor.

That pretty much clinched it. Julius knew who they were and thus where he was going. All that remained was to get there. And if anyone could perform such a miracle these people could.

In one sense they already had. By silvery moonlight Frankenstein discovered how they’d got thus far. The bodies of various sentinels were propped up by the gatehouse like trophies from a good day’s hunting. Their slumped posture was reminiscent of the Mausoleum’s less successful products, but unlike them these weren’t stirring at all. Bayonets pinned each one to the wall in a presumably post-mortem flourish: a message to those who might follow. And all this had been achieved in perfect peace!

Julius felt like saying ‘bravo!’ but equally didn’t feel like attracting these terrible men’s attention. So he merely saw and grew wise instead.

Bowing him through with the greatest respect, the ladder man ushered Julius into the gatehouse. There fresh horrors awaited. Some of its former inhabitants had been New-citizens of sturdy construction. Frankenstein even recognised several burly specimens as his own bacon-saving special productions. Or leastways he thought he recognised them: his handiwork must have taken a lot of second-time-round killing and multiple blows with sabres. The gatehouse was like a charnel house.

Except that the living were also present. A batch of captives were kept under beady eye in one corner and Julius was intrigued. For reasons many and varied they didn’t have the look of French gaolers. If pressed to guess Frankenstein would have placed them on a parade ground in England.

So it proved. Though they were blindfolded and gagged, one had apparently loosened his bonds. He sensed fresh arrivals and spoke out in faultless if frightened English.

‘Who’s there? What are you going to do with us?’

Rather than answer, Julius’ escort simply demonstrated. He took up a discarded musket and plunged its fixed bayonet into the speaker. Years of

practise shone through, just like the blood pooling into his victim's tunic. The man died instantly, with barely a groan.

It proved a cue. One by one the prisoners were taken to various parts of the room and dispatched. Then the fresh corpses were arranged in combative poses alongside pre-existing French dead.

Again, wealth of experience paid off. If Julius hadn't known better, he would have sworn from the emerging tableaux that a fierce little Anglo-French battle had swarmed through here. One in which the Mausoleum guards had acquitted themselves well.

The Ladder man looked upon the scene like an artist. He wandered round, arranging a limb there, inserting weaponry into dead hands there.

Eventually, he stood up and surveyed the finished work. The mark of a great artist is knowing when to leave a canvas alone.

'It is good,' he said. 'Let's go.'

Someone had oiled the Mausoleum's main gate. Normally they moaned like a choir of Lazarans with each and every opening, a deliberate feature of the security arrangements. Now they cracked ajar with hardly a protest.

Flowing smoothly like the lubrication on the hinges, Frankenstein's new friends poured through the gap with him in their midst.

*** * ***

The next morning, when all was revealed and certain tell-tale English artefacts found on the dead, the Mausoleum drew its own conclusions.

Perfidious Albion had struck again; its cursed fleet delivering a raiding party onto France's sacred shores to snatch a coveted Revivalist. English ships notoriously got everywhere they could find even a duck-pond to float on. You might go on to speculate it was just the sort of thing Neo-Nelson would and could do, damn his one remaining eye. There was no absolute proof, true, but the mission carried all the hallmarks of his audacity.

In drafting the required report its authors upgraded that possibility into nigh certainty, and after that the insult didn't seem so bad. Also, the records showed that Julius Frankenstein wasn't so hot anyway and thus maybe the rostbifs had incurred heavy casualties for little gain. Aside from the slight of

waltzing into the Mausoleum and then out again, the English were welcome to him.

That interpretation was eventually accepted by the Convention. Heads would have to roll of course, but only token Terror was visited upon Mausoleum staff.

A mere maiden’s kiss, a child’s slap on the wrist: just one in ten.

Chapter 4: SPICK N’ SPAN

‘Welcome, *monsieur*, most welcome!’

The chamberlain’s array of gold braid was dazzling and his bow exquisitely elegant, but Julius had seen it all before. Moments before in fact. It already seemed like an age since his cheerfully homicidal masked rescuers delivered him here.

‘The chamberlain before you said that,’ Julius replied. ‘And the one before him.’

He indicated his route previous to the high double doors that now sealed them in this ante-room.

This chamberlain went from soft to hard with a speed that put the male generative organ to shame. He showed the steel just below the velvet glove. His eyes glittered.

‘And they meant it,’ he said. ‘As do I. Rest assured, *monsieur*, you would not have got as far as me had you been found in any way wanting…’

Which was both praise and a slap combined. Frankenstein didn’t know whether to feel honoured or offended. Not that it mattered in any case. His opinions in this palace mattered as little as those of the peacocks that patrolled its county-sized grounds. Even less probably. At least they were decorative and no harm to anyone…

Elbow cupped in one hand, the chamberlain rested his chin for the duration of a close scrutiny of Julius. Contrary to Conventionary fashion, he still wore a short-wig and kept it powdered. Actually, he resembled a throwback to pre-Revolutionary days: a look likely to attract lynch mobs on the Parisian streets today.

If so, the man showed no signs of unease. He was not a man of the streets; here was his place and he was at home in it.

‘Hmm,’ he pondered aloud, sounding like a slightly more effeminate Lady Lovelace. ‘Hmm…’

Now Julius knew how the produce in an Ottoman slave market felt. He fought the urge to pose or disport himself to command a better price.

‘‘Hmm…’?’ he said in turn, as both mimicry and query.

The chamberlain returned instantly from reverie-land to fix Julius’ gaze.

‘The eyes of a man,’ he said, ‘are a window into his soul.’

‘Indeed,’ Julius agreed. He’d lived too long to dispute it.

‘And yours,’ continued the chamberlain, ‘reveal a very dark vista…’

Again, Frankenstein could not but agree. In his shaving mirror he daily saw what the chamberlain referred to.

That gentleman’s elbow was now lowered, a decision arrived at.

‘Darkness may conceal all manner of dirt,’ he said. ‘Proceed into the next room and have it washed away.’

*** * ***

The instruction proved to be literal. To Julius’ amazement the room beyond the next set of double doors proved to be a bathing suite. Rather than yet more gilded courtiers, a team of white-clad flunkies, male and female, waited beside a steaming bath.

‘Disrobe, *monsieur,*’ ordered their captain, who incongruously wore a chef’s hat as badge of office. ‘Abandon yourself to our ministrations.’

Willing or not, it was going to happen. It seemed routine and they seemed implacable. Also, amongst their number were bulky sorts for the lifting work, plus soldiers lining the walls (also uniformed entirely in white). Frankenstein realised that if he did not comply compulsion was on hand, and then he would lose his dignity as well as his clothes

So, despite the presence of appraising ladies, Julius stepped forward and stripped.

The water was warm and scented and, in other circumstances, might have been welcome. Less enjoyable, however, was being dunked and scrubbed by professionals of exceptional thoroughness. They were insistent on total immersion and cleansing of the most obscure corners. Meanwhile, extremities were periodically gripped and held so that nails and nasal hair could be radically clipped. Someone even brushed his teeth for him—whilst submerged!

Then, as he surfaced short of breath, Julius caught sight through streaming hair of his garments being born away. For some reason the scene had a strong sense of finality to it.

‘What are you doing with my cloth—’ he started to say, before a strong hand on the top of his head plunged him under again.

Simultaneously, practised fingers scurried over his head like an aquatic tarantula, questing for nits.

Allowed back into light and air, Frankenstein took exception.

‘How dare you? I am a gentleman! I do not harbour livestock!’

The inspector turned out to be a woman with arms like hams and face to match.

‘Makes no difference if you’re Pope or peasant, my dear,’ she informed him cheerfully. ‘Everyone gets the same treatment.’ Then she turned to address her colleagues. ‘He’s free.’

Those was the only comforting words he was going to get. Other strong limbs lifted Julius out and onto fluffy towels on the floor. It was like being a baby again and long lost memories of infancy arose dusty from burial places in his brain, surprised as any Lazaran at being revived.

If so, they were the only dusty thing about Frankenstein by then. Though a fastidious man by nature he was now cleaner than ever before. He stood there dripping water and indignation.

The captain of the bath approached—and approached—and approached yet again, until far too close for European comfort. If this were Switzerland and the bath-captain a wench, they would have been deemed engaged.

The man then inflicted further rudeness via a series of sniffs over Julius at point blank range. Which in turn permitted—in fact forced—Frankenstein to notice that, scent-wise, Bath-captain didn’t exist. Even the air round him had more character and he was just a void in its normality.

Julius had passed his life to date amidst privileged circles where cleanliness, if not Godliness, was becoming de rigueur, yet such high standards as this struck him as extreme; even unnatural…

Which, he then realised, was a silly thought. In his dictated, not chosen, profession of defying death, the unnatural was natural. How much longer must he go on tormenting himself by noticing it? Those who no longer cared were so much happier men…

But it was no good. He had to scratch the itch. A power stronger than willpower made him ask.

‘What was the point of all—?’ he said, or started to say, but desisted when it became clear no one was interested in Julius any more. He doubted they even heard him. Odourless Bath-captain was indicating the next set of doors.

‘Go in there and dry off,’ he ordered, and then turned away. He and his team had a new mission. A marshal of the *Grande Armée* had just entered the room as Julius had earlier. All attention was focused on this new visitor from the unclean.

‘Disrobe, *monsieur*,’ the marshal was told. ‘Abandon yourself to our ministrations.’

*** * ***

Frankenstein let himself out and entered into an sunlit chamber. Floor to ceiling windows flooded it with light to the furthest corners and, as if that did not suffice, the three other walls held polished metal sheets to reflect the rays.

Otherwise the place was empty, devoid of the slightest distraction, but its purpose did not take much deducting. Still dripping water onto the floor, Julius crossed to its centre and basked in the beams. Soon he could feel rapid evaporation underway, plus that revival of animal spirits the sun’s kiss always brings.

Without even a towel to cover his nakedness or supply a fig leaf of normality, Frankenstein felt open to fresh perspectives. The one visible through the high windows seemed an obvious staring point.

Squinting against the sun, he looked into the ornamental gardens stretching into the purple distance. Closer to, the aforementioned peacocks scattered before marching squads of soldiers or other, more casual but still uniformed, strollers. Behind and unseen there was the impression of architectural bulk.

Not that he had any need to rely on intuition. Julius had observed Versailles’ exterior from the coach that brought him there. He instantly recognised the place from numerous prints. Then he’d covertly timed the ride from the first gatehouse beside the road, through interminable security points, and finally, much later, to the front entrance. That and his long walk from there to the bathing room amply confirmed that this was a big palace, a little city in itself. He’d given up as a fruitless exercise counting the rooms and halls and guards and chamberlains en route. Suffice to say, such establishments occupied enough of God’s creation to make their own rules, and visitors simply had to fit in with them.

Surrendering to the flow and a comforting lack of thought, Julius raised his arms like a bird preparing for flight. The sun fell on his skin in a passionate embrace, finally lifting off all excess moisture.

Which was how the next-in-line chamberlain found him, entering the room by a door cunningly concealed in the metalled wall. He wore not gold braid or colourful silk but a garment akin to a toga. It looked light and blindingly white. He carried an identical copy in his arms.

Fancy dress was the final straw. Frankenstein was moved to protest.

‘I am an hygienic man!’ he said. ‘I bathe once a week whether I need to or not. What on earth is all this in aid of?’

This chamberlain waggled his hand equivocally.

‘”On Earth”? I’m not so sure. However, put this on, *monsieur*, and soon all will be made clear. Then he will see you.’

Chapter 5: BEHOLD THE (FORMER) MAN

'The first and the last, by the wrath of Heaven, Emperor of the Jacobins, Protector of the Confederacy of Rogues, Mediator of the Hellish League, Grand Cross of the Legion of Horror, Commander in Chief of the Legions of skeletons left at Moscow, Smolensk, Leipzig and etc. Head Runner of Runaways, Mock High-Priest of the Sanhedrin,, Mock Prophet of the Musselmen, Mock Pillar of the True Faith, Inventor of the Syrian Method of disposing of his own sick and wounded by sleeping draughts, or of captured enemies by the bayonet. First Gravedigger for burying alive, Chief Gaoler of the Holy Father and the King of Spain, Destroyer of crowns and manufacturer of counts, dukes, princes and kings. Chief Douanier of the Continental System, Head Butcher of the Parisian and Toulouse massacres, murderer of Hoffer, Palm., Wright, and yea of his own Prince, the noble and virtuous Duke of Enghien, and of a thousand others. Kidnaper of ambassadors, High Admiral of the Invasion barges and praams, Cup-bearer of the Jaffa poison, Arch-Chancellor of waste-paper treaties, Arch-Treasurer of the plunder of the world, the Sanguinary Coxcomb, assassin and incendiary. Werewolf of Europe, the BONEYMAN…'

Text of a poster widely distributed throughout occupied Europe. Much copied but supposedly from an original supplied by His Majesty's Britannic Government

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'He' proved to be a mere two more chambers, plus a host of highly professional guards and yet more searches (even of a near-nude man) away.

Then, finally:

The throne-room was modest considering what ‘he’ had conquered—not least Death. There was a throne and rich battle-scene tapestries, but not much else. It was the opulence of the field camp: rich stuff but thrown together, standing-by ready for swift departure.

‘Cleaner than he came from the womb,’ confirmed the chamberlain from the threshold. Then he withdrew, leaving them alone together.

Frankenstein could either surrender to awe or stand his ground. And it had to be the latter if his personality wasn’t to be blasted away, leaving him naked before the naked power manifested here.

So, Julius assumed a questioning face and plucked at his toga. To emphasise the point he also shook his still damp hair and the locks discharged a light rain of droplets onto the polished floor.

To Frankenstein’s pleasure, Napoleon actually shrank from their insignificant threat, seeking the further recesses of his throne. The panic lasted several seconds before he realised it didn’t look good

‘Disease…,’ ‘explained’ Napoleon. ‘There must be no germs! The living crawl with them! And filth. Filth breeds pestilence. Pestilence brings death. I cannot afford to die again: not before my work is done. Not when I was only brought back with such pain…’

Wrestling from the grip of strong emotions, Napoleon recalled he should be playing host. An all-powerful, condescending, host at that.

‘So you understand the need?’ he asked Frankenstein, semi politely. ‘For the cleansing, the… manhandling?’

He did indeed. ‘Misinformed,’ concluded Julius to himself, accompanied by relief. ‘Plus scientifically ignorant. And therefore fallible.’

‘Absolutely,’ he said.

To some small extent it meant he could now stand at ease before the Revived Emperor. Also, the puzzling minimalist decor was explained: less places for pesky ‘germs’ and ‘pestilence’ to lurk.

In fact, Frankenstein had had his suspicions, starting with the rough fetching from the Mausoleum. Only a daring enemy nation or one particular ego would dare slight the Convention so. That a certain elite regiment were sent to do it removed all doubt on the subject. England might have its Brigade of Guards but only a certain personage had the ‘Old Guard’: veterans and sons of veterans of famous campaigns, at his disposal.

Even so, Julius now boggled at the sheer audacity—which was another clincher in itself. If even one of the raiders had been killed or wounded and left behind then all would have been revealed, as good as leaving a calling card. Arrogant in their excellence (and indulged in it by their master) they distinguished themselves with great sportive moustaches. Those that couldn't grow them for any reason wore false ones.

Frankenstein had thus identified them from the first face at the window. They might have dispensed with their popinjay uniforms and bearskins that night but the lip furniture remained. Which in turn meant he who sent them was reckless of discovery. 'He' must calculate that the Convention needed him as much—perhaps more—than he needed them.

That thought made Frankenstein study this king-amongst Lazarans anew.

Amongst the first details Julius noticed was the length of his fingernails. Yellow and cracked, they curved over the arm-rest of the throne, precisely matching his skin-tone. And texture too.

Second shock was the angry purple marks around his scraggy Imperial neck. Frankenstein frowned. History said Bonaparte had died of natural causes, not hanging…

However, someone didn't care for being scrutinised, even if it was by a doctor. Napoleon felt the need to re-establish just who was interviewing who.

'Ahem…,' he said. 'Good day to you, herr Frankenstein.'

His voice was that of a vigorous leader of men—and didn't belong in that prune-like body.

'And good day to you too,' replied Julius, '*monsieur le*…' Then he hesitated, tripping over what might be the proper form.

Napoleon had compassion on him—which would have shocked his courtiers had any been present. He raised one yellow claw to wave away any embarrassment. The fingernails clattered.

'Do not concern yourself. Beyond these walls to term me Emperor is a capital offence. Perhaps you knew that—although I somehow doubt it would influence your decision. However, here at home my old title is applied to me by my servants. I have no strong views on the subject. One has accumulated so many names in the course of an illustrious career. Use any of them that pleases you. Except the offensive variety of course…'

So that excluded ‘The Wolf of Europe’ and ‘The Great Butcher’ then. Not to mention ‘The Grave-ripped Abomination’ favoured by the British press.

A pity. Finally meeting the man in the flesh, as opposed to state portraits or caricatures, Frankenstein saw that the Times had it about right.

Speaking purely of the view, it had been no act of kindness to haul Napoleon Bonaparte back across the Great Divide—either to himself or others. Serum had worked wonders over and above the ‘mere’ restoring of life. However, in this case it wasn’t wonders but miracles that were required—and an unreasonable multitude of them.

The plain fact was that he’d laid in the grave too long between death on St Helena and the Convention’s decision to raise him. During those years decay had had its way and dried his flesh to leather. Serum could reverse some elements of death but not all. In fact, aesthetically speaking, the part-repairs only made matters worse.

Cumulatively, even Frankenstein, a medical man and someone who’d supped deep from Revivalist science’s cup of horrors, had trouble fixing his eye to the point. He found himself evading the Emperor’s gaze like some bashful maiden.

And the Emperor, who retained his sharp perceptions if not his former shape, noticed it.

‘You think I am not a pretty sight, no?

‘Why,’ Julius thought, ‘should I degrade myself by denying it?’

‘No,’ he said, not in any wounding way but as statement of fact. He’d always strived to be honest with the Lazarans from his own laboratory, going against his nature by being cruel to be kind.

No other answer was permissible re the risen Emperor. A desiccated, jaundiced, frog was the closest description Julius could come to. The man was naked—no dirt-harbouring toga for him—and his body was bleached and alternatively bloated or collapsed. Also hairless, save for atop where the lank locks and kiss curl familiar from all his portraits survived. Plus, of course, the eyes. Their fire remained. Indeed they positively burned.

‘No more need to say ‘not tonight, Josephine,’ eh?’ prompted the Emperor, rubbing salt into his own wounds. ‘No woman, not even my dear departed and so ambitious Josephine would approach me now. Not without spewing her stomach contents. Don’t you agree?’

Actually Julius didn’t. Rather shockingly, he found his take on human nature even more cynical than Bonaparte’s.

‘Maybe some that I’ve met might,’ he ventured. ‘If sufficiently rewarded.’

Perhaps the Emperor liked contradiction—in moderation. Maybe it made a change from the army of yes-men in his palace. Whatever the reason, he smiled.

‘That could be so,’ he replied. ‘One should never underestimate the aphrodisiac charms of power. But you are beyond seduction I see. Which surprises me. You are a doctor, even a famous one, dipped deep in Revivalism; surely you have seen worse than me?’

Frankenstein cursed his stubborn integrity. One day it was going to land him in the embrace of Madame Guillotine. Nevertheless…

‘No,’ he said. ‘Not often.’

Napoleon sighed. Those sections of his rib-cage still responding to stimuli heaved.

‘At least you are honest,’ he answered, after a tense pause. ‘It is a contrast. Last month some greaser from the Convention told me I was a fine figure of a man—“for my age”.’

‘Really?’ said Julius. Again that was one word so vastly richer in English than French. Inflection meant it could carry a whole array of meanings, all subtly different. But not so in their current tongue. The Emperor merely thought his anecdote doubted.

‘Tis true!’ he replied. ‘What a creeping merde-mouth he was! So I have arranged for his transfer to the Russian front. There instructions are given that he be permitted to experience the very fullness of events…’

‘Vindictive’ concluded Julius. He wondered again with fresh urgency if there was any brake mechanism on his own wayward words.

‘And lest the relevant calculation clog your thoughts at this vital time,’ the Emperor pressed on, ‘pray let me enlighten you about my ‘age.’ Nigh seventy years: that’s how long I’ve lived—if you include nearly nine in the tomb. Which equalled nine years of absolute nothingness, in case you were wondering…’

In fact Frankenstein was. Every Revivalist did, however much they pretended otherwise and professed to be wearied by the subject. Much of popular acceptance of Revivalism, contrary to the rulings of the Church and some states, stemmed from that: the outside hope that one day the big

question might be answered. People couldn't help themselves. Julius had even taxed Lady Lovelace on the subject, as he would every Lazaran capable of a sensible answer until the day finally came for Frankenstein to find out for himself first hand.

'It signifies nothing,' he said, to comfort the Emperor. 'Everyone says the same…'

The bulging eyes returned from their wondering study of the room. They blazed at Julius.

'Imbecile! I am not 'everyone.' Do you delude yourself? Do you insult me by thinking that might be so? Think again little man, and think quick. Of course I expected different for myself! Heaven should have flung open its doors to me!'

'Or the other place' thought Julius, unable to help himself and concerned lest it communicate to his face. He was under no illusion; a storm had broken out of a clear sky and its thunderbolts might well strike him.

'First glory here, then glory ever after,' the little Lazaran ranted on. 'That was my expectation: my due! That would have been justice. I will not endure injustice!'

Then Julius decided: 'What the hell….' He might as well go due to a conscious comment as an inadvertent one. Let this warmed-up Zeus throw lightning if he liked.

'Injustice is the lot of mortal men,' he countered. 'In all times and in all places. Of all men…'

There, he had said it. It was pleasing that his possible last words should be the honest truth.

But the anticipated explosion didn't come; the fire in the eyes did not flare forth. The Emperor subsided back into the throne.

'All mortal men,' he echoed, suddenly calm sounding again. Only the eyes maintained the malevolence.

On balance, Frankenstein decided he preferred the rant mode. This 'quiet and rational' mood was probably more hazard rich.

However, it was left at that. The Emperor splayed his fingers over the arms of his throne and subsided into its uncomfortable opulence.

'I think I may come to like you,' he said eventually. 'Maybe. You have backbone. Or is it impudence?'

Frankenstein inclined his head in minimalist bow.

‘Modesty prevents me from reply,’ he said, ‘your highness…’

There, that was it. Thanks to lack of forethought he’d hit upon the right title. It fitted the person addressed but at the same time brought the speaker no discredit.

For most certainly this pale thing upon his throne was high above usual considerations. He had only to say ‘invade!’ and—subject to the Convention’s rubber stamp—whole armies, hundreds of thousands of men, would. He could ask of people ‘die for my cause—whatever it happens to be today’ and they would, also in their many thousands. He held true power. If that was not ‘highness’ in worldly terms, then what was?

The Emperor liked it too. He’d had every opportunity to wear out all the other honorifics. By happy accident, Julius had said the right thing. The preliminaries now over they could proceed to business.

‘So yes,’ the Emperor summed up, intending to curtail any flow of bogglement and blurted gratitude, ‘it was I who plucked you from the Mausoleum. And in such a witty manner, leaving the English with the blame, courtesy of a few expendable prisoners. Did you not suspect before? I mean, who else would dare?’

Which proved that however clever he might be in other respects, the Emperor had not done his research on Julius Frankenstein. The man stood there, not amazed, not noticeably pleased, not even tongue-tied, but reticent simply because he chose to be.

‘Who indeed?’ Julius ‘replied.’

It wasn’t the dazzled response the Emperor was expecting and invariably got. For the first time he actually studied his catch.

‘Is that all you have to say?’

As a soldier’s son Frankenstein had been taught manners. In his childhood, absence of ‘please’ meant your request was ignored; and no ‘thank you’ resulted in loss of whatever you got.

So: ‘Thank you,’ said Julius, and bowed.

This was more like it, but it still failed to satisfy.

‘Don’t thank me,’ commanded the Emperor. ‘Repay me!’

Julius stood easy, his prejudices confirmed. It hadn’t taken long for naked self-interest to show its face and shoulder social niceties aside. That was the way of the exalted and also the reason they’d got that far and high.

‘In what way?’ asked Julius.

The Emperor pursed his lips in pained distaste.

‘Oh dear…,’ he muttered, probably to himself, ‘its makes things so tedious when the footsoldiers are slow…’

Yet he rallied for a further effort. Impatiently, the Emperor spelt it out.

‘The Compeigne Mausoleum,’ he said, ‘deals in quantity. Which is very useful for my armies and the wonders they would have me do, but it’s mere bulk production stuff. A sausage factory. Whereas here, here the emphasis is on quality…’

For the first time Frankenstein’s interest was fully engaged.

‘‘Here’? You have Revival facilities here?’

The Emperor gave him an ‘of course’ look.

‘Do you really think I would entrust my well-being to those… slaughtermen?’

It took the briefest consideration. ‘No,’ agreed Julius. ‘Upon reflection, that would not be wise.’

‘Exactly. Now I want you to be ‘wise’ on my behalf.’

‘In what way, highness?’ asked Julius.

The Emperor was visibly wearying, a dismissive hand was waved.

‘I have a director of research: an Egyptian. Go through the far door and you will find him. He will instruct you in your duties…’

Those vibrant eyes trapped in a dead body tried to lock gazes again, but Julius couldn’t hold it. He blushed for shame.

‘You do know what your duty is, I take it…,’ the Emperor enquired.

Even if his eyes were not his to command Julius could at least stand up straight.

‘I can guess. My duties as regards you, that is…’

The Emperor pulled at a fold of rank flesh. It lifted far too easily and retained finger indents when allowed to fall.

‘Duty, duties…,’ he said, ‘one follows from the other. Though I sense you make a distinction. No matter: one or the other suffices so long as they are… executed.’

Was that a pointed choice of phrase, designed to chill? Probably not, Julius concluded. Individual lifespans lay way below this man’s powers of focus. At a minimum he dealt only in entire regiments of deaths; or sizeable cities ablaze, nothing less. A wholesaler in the mortality trade if you like.

And ditto re salaries, sustenance and suchlike mundane matters: all beneath him. The basics of life (and after-life) had come to him on a plate for so long he thought they arrived like oxygen. However, enough vestigial

links with the humdrum remained for him to recall that underlings liked wages. He assumed Frankenstein's hesitance was lucre related.

'All your needs will be supplied, if that's what you're worrying about,' said the Emperor, tetchily. He thought he was being very magnanimous to descend so far from Olympus.

'Those needs are but few, highness…,' Julius reassured him.

'All the better—even though my pocket is limitless…'

In the context, mention of 'pockets' could only be hilarious. The Emperor was sprawled naked as a cadaver awaiting the anatomists. However, rather than laugh and maybe end it all that way, Julius instead dared all on a whim. Here and now was an opportunity that might never come again, a unique opportunity…

'However, there is one special boon you could grant,' he said. 'In fact that only you could grant…'

The Emperor heard honeyed words too often to be impressed. He was also disappointed to find Frankenstein willing to grovel on the floor for gain like all the rest. The smile upon his face was neither kind or flattering.

'Doubtless. Spit it out: what is it?'

Julius squared his shoulders and prepared for the possibility of being blown away—first metaphorically for his presumption, and then literally when the guards arrived.

'An answer to a question, highness. That's all I ask of you.'

His highness cheered up. So it might not be some sordid transaction involving gold or promotion after all.

'Ah, that's different. Such a modest request I'm more inclined to grant…'

'But will I have the truth, highness? Your very first thought, free of censorship?'

Napoleon, an Emperor, and 'First Marshall' of Conventionary France, the greatest man of his age (and also, technically, the one succeeding it), was intrigued. He was growing glad he'd collected this particular butterfly for his collection.

'I am not to be dictated to, Frankenstein; but what you ask is quite possible. A honest answer: why not? Ask away.'

Julius drew deep breath and let go. It could have been about the rope and stretch marks around the Imperial neck but he dared to dive darker and deeper still.

‘Then my question is this: why?’

The Emperor was puzzled. At the very least he’d been expecting names and dates, say about a specific murder or missing treasure ship.

‘‘Why’ what?’

Frankenstein spread his hands to encompass the room, the palace, the whole wide world moulded by this man, and the glittering career that had led to here and now. With a pleasurable shock the Emperor suddenly understood.

It would be a lie to say his Imperial highness had never posed that question to himself, in sleepless early hours or during tedious state functions. Then, when answer—quite unexpectedly—arrived and was honed to shining perfection, he’d kept it secret like a precious possession. But here was this here-today-and-gone-tomorrow little-person impudently requesting sight of it from him, asking for all—all!—to be revealed!

Initial reaction was to balk and fob off with some witticism, perhaps something stolen from the vast cliché collection of his former first minister, Talleyrand. However, somehow the sheer insignificance of the asker swept away all objections. The ant was asking why? of the elephant that could crush it. It was so novel as to be intriguing: even naughty…

All his life the Emperor had played his cards close to his chest, solitary and secretive as an oyster. He’d always been in charge, first of himself and then of other men. But now the temptation to divulge, just this once, was overwhelming: nigh erotic.

His first framed and dismissive answer was dissolved in emotion, quite melted away. The Emperor closed his eyes and visualised his own epitaph

‘I will tell you ‘why,’’ he said, almost quivering with emotion. ‘I will! It is… because I wish to carve my name upon the stone of history! To carve it so very very deep that not even God can erase it!’

And in this way, by dint of simple daring, Julius Frankenstein learnt what the finest minds in Europe had sweated and spoilt their nights over, but despaired of discovering. The question that kings and prime ministers sponsored secret conferences about, to no avail.

Now, Julius Frankenstein, a mere glorified grave-robber, knew the truth of it. Now there were two in Europe that were aware—and only one of them alive.

‘Even aeons from now,’ the Emperor continued, almost shouting and possessed by passion, ‘it must never be as if I never were!’

Frankenstein’s spirits plunged, though he was careful to keep his face rapt. So that was it? The very same banal impulse that led men to etch their of-no-interest-to-anyone initials upon trees and ancient monuments? Except that this impulse was writ large and in the blood of multitudes. Empires had been moulded like clay and oceans of tears shed for this?

‘I see…,’ he said. Which he did and was sadder for it.

‘Good,’ said Napoleon. ‘But keep it to yourself…’

Both of them were fatigued by their talk, albeit in different ways. Frankenstein was glad to see the Emperor make a signal and cause a curtain to fall between them.

It must have lead-weighted, because Julius had to step back lively to ensure he wasn’t enveloped. That step took him into collision with hitherto invisible guards. They were huge in all dimensions, even bigger than the normal run of Old Guard.

‘Come along with us, there’s a good little dead-doctor,’ said one, laying a plate-like hand on Julius’ shoulder.

Before he was guided away, Frankenstein saw that the reverse of the curtain took the form of a huge map. And although the fall of light did not completely oblige, he got a good glimpse. Good enough to observe that the frontiers shown bore no relation whatsoever to present reality.

Clearly, the Emperor was far from finished carving history yet.

Chapter 6: MUMMY!

Speaking of carving…

‘Who amongst you humble students wishes to know a secret?’

Of course they did: they were scientists, after a fashion, and men of enquiring mind. Yet the Egyptian paused and waited till they’d all raised their hands like schoolboys. Frankenstein felt degraded but realised that secrets usually came at a price. He took a gamble on it being worth paying.

‘Then I will tell you…,’ said the Egyptian, lowering his turban and voice likewise. ‘It is this: that all who came before me erred. They were imbeciles! Blind men in a lightless room, groping for a black cat that is not there. Before the era of I, the Egyptian, Revivalism was indistinguishable from black magic, and just as reliable…’

Julius could have been insulted but instead almost laughed. Memories of great-uncle Victor were few: he’d embarked on his hunt for the murdering monster he’d created whilst Julius was still young. He’d never returned to Geneva and lay buried or burnt, depending on who you believed, in the frozen north. Yet, as Julius grew up, ‘Uncle Victor’s presence remained palpable. His darkened study-cum-laboratory remained untouched in the family home and young Julius had often disobeyed strict instructions to never venture in. He could still visualise it as if there: the orderly rows of medical tomes, the neatly laid-out instruments, sharp and gleaming. Anything less like ‘black magic’ was scarcely imaginable. Victor Frankenstein had been a man of the modern age par excellence: someone who’d dared wrangle with the Almighty about His monopoly on creation.

And look where it had got him! Who in fact was the wiser? Uncle Victor or this pantomime actor from the mystic orient?

So, Julius kept his face straight and said nothing. Indeed, a increasingly promising student of deceit, he even tried to match the agog expressions worn by his fellow ‘inductees.’ Their pens were poised and he copied them.

The Egyptian drew back from their desks, taking his miasma of sweat and incense with him.

‘And the secret of the Egyptian?’ he teased, preparing them for life-changing illumination, even glancing at the guarded door as if to make sure

no one could escape to shriek ‘eureka!’ ‘This prize-amongst-prizes? My great discovery?’

This was worse than a certain chambermaid of Julius’ adolescent acquaintance. First she said she would, then she said she might, and finally she transpired to be ‘a good girl.’ Memory of those aching loins of long ago made Frankenstein angry.

‘Is…?’ he prompted, earning a ‘if looks could kill’ instant death from under the bushy brows.

‘Is,’ hissed the Egyptian, licking his lips, ‘unpowdered mummy!’

And all three recent recruits to the Emperor’s secret Revivalist service scribbled away as though their teacher transmitted revelation. Except that had anyone read Frankenstein’s notebook they would see he’d made a fuss of writing just one word, writ large:

‘Charlatan!’

The Egyptian crossed to where, amid a wreckage of mummy cases and bandages, an unwrapped specimen awaited him. Dry and brown as shoe-leather, it personified the patience needed to wait longer still and outlast present company; even present civilisation—such as it was—if left alone.

‘To this day,’ said the Egyptian, laying a proprietorial hand on the long gone man (or possibly woman), ‘fools had added powdered mummy to create the super-serum. And that is one minor, superficial, secret. But attend to me and I will reveal to you a deeper truth. It is this: to grind up the mummy’s flesh is to reduce its powers! This to me was obvious. Its restorative powers are diminished by the crushing pestle and wasted upon the air—which needs it not. Whereas if you cut…’

In a fluid flash of action he drew a knife from within his robes. It was a well practised coup de theatre, Julius recognised: plus a warning that they should still be wary of the old ham.

The blade must have been of well honed steel, for the Egyptian was able to remove a sliver without undue carving. He held out the thin, nigh translucent, slice for them to see.

‘Now, this,’ he said, ‘suitably prepared and infused with serum, is sufficient to give the Emperor a whole inventive day. Ten will inspire him to plan a campaign. Imagine that! Simple slices of forgotten Nile dweller, dead three for thousand years, can topple or raise an empire today!’

‘What if he takes twenty?’ asked Julius.

The Egyptian was deceived by Frankenstein's seriousness. He rolled his eyes at the mere thought of such super-size portions.

'I hardly dare to speculate, oh Swiss of much presumption. And I wonder that you dare. Have you no piety? Who knows? Perhaps in such a case our Emperor would ascend to Paradise in a fiery chariot. Or Almighty Allah might send an angel with a sword to chastise us for our arrogance. Both are distinct possibilities. I say again, who knows?'

'Not you, charlatan' wrote Frankenstein. And then: 'But someone should find out…'

Fortunately, the Egyptian was too far away to find out, nor had he acquired the useful skill of reading upside down. So he assumed that Julius was noting the rebuke.

Frankenstein's forwardness emboldened one of the other students to speak. A renegade Scottish scholar, he was a disciple in desperate search of a master if ever there was one. Julius had caught him making cow-eyes at the Egyptian earlier—once he'd drawn a blank with his colleague bearing the illustrious Frankenstein name.

'You mentioned 'preparation,' wise sir,' said the Scot. 'Are we yet at a stage to share in this wisdom?'

Somewhat unfairly as an exile from his own nation, Julius hated traitors. Conventionary France was stuffed with whole foreign legions of them, quite literally: people who'd severed all ties through thinking they'd smelt the spirit of the age. Scottish regiments, Irish battalions, squadrons of Italians-of-advanced- opinions: you name it. Frankenstein certainly had a name for them, and thought it now.

The Egyptian drew a deep breath, as if actually considering the question. Julius would have bet all his years to come that he could guess the answer.

'No,' came the eventual crushing verdict, 'that time is not come.'

The Scot subsided pitifully, and the more robust Dane beside him drew a savage line across the prepared page in his notebook.

'But it shall come,' the Egyptian continued, after a perfectly timed pause that allowed hope to almost die, but then rise again like a Lazaran. 'If you attend and are open to the flow of instruction, if you do not speak when you should listen—unlike some…'

He looked at Frankenstein, who couldn't care less and waved back.

Why should Julius care? He already had the Egyptian's secret, better than the man understood it himself. There was no longer any need to demean himself

It was—or now had been—one of the many minor mysteries of Versailles, put to one side whilst greater puzzles were pondered. Frankenstein had noted and wondered about the line of little strips suspended between two high towers, hung out to be dried by sun and wind. He'd observed the permanent guard detailed to scare birds from them, or winch them in should rain threaten. Now all was explained.

It was already known that serum melded well with flesh; and that feeding them on it assisted uptake when Lazarans 'dined.' Thus it followed that the dried variety absorbed just that bit more. So, when the Egyptian sun-dried what was already supremely dry, it might just make some infinitesimal difference. The sort of difference noticeable by an Emperor growing acclimatised to super-serum. All the more so if he were desperate for full life, as recalled through rose-tinted perspectives. If he stupidly craved the imagined sparkling thought processes of youth and yesteryear, then yes, it might just delude him that the Egyptian had something.

A heady mix: the ancient civilisation of a land he'd conquered early in his first career, plus the romance of the ineffable past and survivals from it in the form of preserved dead. Dead, moreover, on whom great care had been lavished in hopes of securing an afterlife. Individually, each factor might mean little, but collectively they comprised a straw a drowning Emperor might clutch at.

Frankenstein had nothing but contempt for such sloppy thinking and the opportunists who preyed on it. Circus quacks and pox-doctors had more honour. He stood up.

'Here endeth the lesson,' he said, and set off.

The Egyptian had come to expect respect, even deference. He bathed in the Emperor's favour and others usually wanted to share that sunshine. Now, puffed-ego offended and at maximum inflation, he saw fit to put himself between Frankenstein and the exit.

Almost to the last second he was minded to stand his ground and not make way. Then, in the space of that instant, the Egyptian realised Julius wasn't going to slow. A Swiss missile was heading his way powered by disdain. The only alternative to being shouldered aside was to lose face.

The Egyptian twirled like a ballerina, or a whirling dervish with only one whirl in him. His remaining students gaped.

Julius Frankenstein gained the door—and an enemy.

Chapter 7: SUN-DRIED PROMOTION

Versailles had been beautiful once; superlative even: a crowning glory of European culture. But now the minds that made it that way were gone, replaced by men of a different mettle (and metal). Now functionality ruled and all the gloss and glory were scuffed. Any repairs or additions were inspired by the ‘it’ll do’ school of thought. Sheaves of muskets were stacked in gilt-drenched salons and the libraries were unloved and muffled by dust. Even the famed formal gardens walk now housed the NCOs’ latrines, hijacking its handy irrigation system.

In short, Versailles had been brought bang up to date and rough-married to modernity…

But there were still enclaves (or last stands) of the old grandeur, kept pristine for special purposes. Julius Frankenstein met a Minister of State in one and had a poison pen letter read to him…

> ‘…Furthermore, I beg to inform you that this interloper among proper scientists has not even brains enough to ascend to the level of incompetence. Between his ears a desert stretches and the wind whistles over its barren expanse without meaning or profit.
>
> Indeed, excellency, I boldly cast doubt over his rightful claim to the illustrious Frankenstein family name. It may well be that he has murdered the true holder and assumed his identity! Or, in the unlikely event that his claims are true, then I can only commiserate with his afflicted kin and conclude, as they must have done, that even the finest stock can breed idiots.
>
> So, sir, you know full well how I hunger and thirst to serve both science and our beloved Emperor. Therefore, I implore you —indeed, I even dare to say that you must—dismiss from the Imperial service this misbegotten block-headed Swiss. And since he now knows what he should not know, your excellencies may care to consider dispensing with his dubious talents in a manner which will forever seal his lips. It is not for me to suggest, let alone direct, but it is also nothing less than my sworn duty to call to your mind’s eye the image of our very own guillotine standing

> in the august Courtyard of Justice. You may well think it a neat and relevant image in the context of this satanic viper within our bosom who…’

Julius yawned. The man sitting opposite him reading the letter aloud looked up.

‘I should stop, *monsieur*?’ he asked, surprised. ‘You do not wish to hear the rest?’

Frankenstein finished patting the inadvertent gape. It cheered him to be courtly, even—or especially—in the face of mortal peril.

‘I am indifferent, sir,’ he said. ‘Do whichever is more agreeable to you. One was not listening in any case…’

There was something about this clammy bureaucrat that nagged at Julius. They’d not met before—he would have remembered that—but maybe his pale face had appeared in a news-sheet or the like. If so, identification remained illusive. Not that he was in any rush to strengthen their acquaintance.

Which was a pity from Julius’ point of view. Had he been less sickened by current affairs and paid more attention to their reporting, he might have recognised Joseph Fouché, the Convention’s Minister of Police. He might further have speculated why such a notable was representing the Emperor or talking to mere him—and thus had a feast of food for thought. As it was he was merely wary.

Minister Fouché nodded.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I had gained the impression of being ignored…’

Though he put emphasis in his voice it failed for being carried in such a sibilant whisper. Nothing would ever be gleaned from analysis of it.

Nevertheless, Julius recalled his obligations, even to such a repellent individual.

‘I apologise if I appear impolite, sir,’ he said. ‘I am not usually so arrogant seeming.’

The man adjusted his rimless glasses. Julius had speedily come to dislike those too. When the light hit them in a certain way it made their owner appear eyeless.

‘‘No?’ queried Fouché. ‘But surely, *monsieur*, your family heritage might justify a certain dignity, even pride…?’

Frankenstein preferred that the man remained still, for every move sent invisible waves of spiritual affliction his way. From the moment they'd met he'd felt himself to be in the presence of something terribly wrong. He'd raised Lazarans with healthier looking skin.

'No,' replied Julius, so firmly as to cut off that conversational road.

'Then kindly explain your demeanour.'

Julius pointed at the letter.

'Because,' he said, 'your man knows nothing.'

Fouché put on a show of being taken aback by such excessive candour, but Frankenstein believed not a single thing about him.

'No?' It was a request for confirmation rather than doubt.

'No,' Julius obliged. He was being very negative today—and keeping things clipped lest the unclean presence seize on something. 'Nothing—or next to nothing.'

From a pocket of his shabby fawn frock-coat Fouché extracted a lady-like notepad. It was shod in gold and had a holster for a matching pencil to one side. The Minister made a ritual, perhaps even a sacrament, of opening at a pristine page and then twisting the writing stick till exactly the right amount of lead emerged.

Fouché licked the tip with a tongue that darted snake-like from between thin grey lips. Then he paused, poised.

' "Nothing", Monsieur Frankenstein? Or next to nothing? Which is it? We require precision.'

There was not the slightest overt menace there—usually the default stance of much of the French apparatus. The bureaucrat seemed merely anxious to be enlightened.

Julius was not deceived. This particular cold-fish in human form was new to him, but the type was not. The man had consumed all his tedious debriefings, the sterile interrogations about Revivalism and the Compiegne and Heathrow establishments' advances (or lack of them) which had gone before. He'd dined on the end product of that sausage-machine process and still deemed it worthy of a second helping. In short: a bore.

'Let us settle on "next to nothing",' said Frankenstein. 'By accident the Egyptian has stumbled upon a slight refinement of secondary processes. He does not understand the how or why. Hence all the vehemence of his attempts to hang on to favour.'

Notes were being made—more than the bare words warranted. People always find that perturbing and Frankenstein was moved to make conversation.

‘Where did you find him?’ he asked. ‘A medicine wagon at a country fayre?’

Fouché’s pen failed to falter. Nor did he look up.

‘No,’ he said. ‘It was in Egypt. He came recommended. And expensive. We took references. Be aware we are not that easily deceived, *monsieur*.’ It was a shot across the bow.

‘I see…’

‘Ah, but do you, *monsieur*? That is the question. Do you see? And speaking of you, I go on to ask: do you know nothing? Or next to nothing? Or maybe something?’

‘The last,’ Julius replied.

‘Really?’

‘I believe so.’

The Minister still only had eyes for his notepad. Julius suspected it was the primary arena of his thoughts, the bank vault in which he stored his true life.

‘Do tell…,’ said Fouché.

Again, it was a cordial invitation from one reasonable man to another, rather than a command.

Should Julius imitate a man divulging all? When ‘all’ didn’t really merit the effort?

‘The Egyptian infuses serum into strips of mummy,’ he said. ‘Which is a singularly absorbent… meat. The resultant admix is made concentrate by sun drying. *C’est tout*!’

The bureaucrat was intrigued, Julius could tell. Although his pen hand remained steady his nostrils had dilated. Plus, his pinched face was now even more so. The hair-line had drawn back too. Myriad involuntary reflexes betrayed even this most opaque of men, revealing ‘tells’ to those in the know. Doctors make good card-players.

‘*C’est tout?*’ echoed Fouché.

‘*C’est tout.*’ Julius batted it back

‘The process need not be performed here?’

‘No. Anywhere there is sun will do. Iceland would be worse but southern France better. You see the principle. African sunlight might be the

best, being that much fiercer, but I suspect the Egyptian prefers his Versailles life to hot work by the Nile…'

If he concurred with that slander Fouché gave no sign of it.

'And you could do this?' he asked.

'I—or anyone,' answered Julius. 'Indeed, I could even improve the process employing lens to focus the sun's rays. Or something similar…'

With a wave of one hand Frankenstein dismissed the problem as a minor, merely technical, matter. Nothing beyond a morning's work and few hours of Swiss expertise. His nation's reputation for mastery of intricate devices such as timepieces preceded him and paved the way.

Frankenstein perceived his companion was a quick learner, and bold besides. Though appearances suggested otherwise, he dared to dash headlong into worlds not his own. In short, Julius concluded, he was that rarity: a buccaneer amongst bureaucrats. Also, probably way more important than he looked. Not that that was difficult: he looked like a provincial child-molester.

'And the mummy component, *monsieur*?' asked Fouché.

'Of no intrinsic value: mere superstition: utility by association. Granted, mummies were people preserved for an afterlife, but not of the active, Lazaran, variety we are concerned with here. The two things, superficially akin, are in truth entirely unconnected. Beef steak would do just as well, if sufficiently sun-dried. As would scrag-end or giblets. I'd recommend any of the cheaper cuts if cost is a consideration…'

More notes were dashed down, in a positive frenzy of pencil work now. Again, Fouché spoke without looking up.

'I regret to inform you, *monsieur*, that it is. Ordinarily, matters vital to the Emperor are not bound by sordid budgetary fetters.'

Julius mentally sat up. 'Emperor.' It was instructive that he called him that. Servants of the Convention shouldn't.

'If his Majesty wished to dine on nothing but black swan,' Fouché continued, compounding his crimes, 'then he could and would. However, permit me to confide to you the quite shocking cost of procuring a regular supply of mummies. Not to mention ensuring their genuine antiquity. Rogue merchants descend upon our need like flies to a turd. There have been attempts to foist upon us pseudo mummies of quite recent vintage. Murder victims apparently, sourced from the Orient where life is cheap, and

then subjected to crash-mummification via chemical baths. Or so one would-be fraudster told us…'

The Minister finally raised his face and locked looks with Julius. 'Under torture, naturally…'

Frankenstein wouldn't oblige him with the sought for reaction, or indeed any give-away.

'Naturally,' he agreed.

'So,' Fouché went on, head bowed again, 'to acquire the requisite supply the Egyptian demands we have had to go to extreme lengths and expense. Which, of course, we are happy to do for our beloved Emperor.'

'And country,' prompted Julius, feeling playful now that he found his point well received.

'Just so,' confirmed Fouché, unfazed. 'However, the Revolutionary government, though generous in many respects, is not possessed of infinite resources. Securing a steady stream of millennia old mummies has caused us to—what is it the English say?—feel the pinch. Which is an apt choice of phrase because it is those same English who have made it so expensive…'

It is not the done thing in polite company, and certainly not in the presence of patriots, to dwell on a country's misfortunes and defeats—and never less so than in the case of the French. Yet it was he who'd broached the subject and almost invited comment.

'Ah, yes,' said Julius—but considerately, as if dredging up an obscure memory of no great weight in the first place, 'Lord Nelson, the Battle of the Nile…'

'The very same, *monsieur*. Leading to the stranding of our expeditionary force in Egypt and their eventual defeat.'

Despite himself, Julius was doubled impressed by this functionary. He'd never yet heard a Frenchman baldly admit defeat before. 'Betrayal' certainly, 'fate' quite often, but never the dreaded 'D' word. Here was a man specially trained to face cold hard facts. Or possibly someone already so cold as to be immune to them.

'Since which time,' said Fouché, 'the English naval blockade, latterly under the revived Neo-Nelson, has closed the sea-lanes to us to the point of strangulation. Our supply of original Egyptian relics ran out long ago and you cannot conceive the pains required to procure ancient cadavers and safely ferry them here. Nor will I impart these details to you…'

The Minister’s gaze had risen again. Just like those implied secret ships it carried an important cargo: the message that it not forgotten Julius was a foreigner, with divergent loyalties.

‘Suffice to say, our country could support several divisions for the same cost. Twice as many if composed of New-citizens. Or perhaps raise another fleet to contest that intolerable English command of the Seas…’

‘After Trafalgar?’ queried Julius, greatly daring.

‘After Trafalgar,’ Fouché confirmed. ‘Even after Yarmouth Harbour…’

Mere mention of that more recent and still worse debacle, which Julius had politely omitted, suggested they were on new and uniquely candid territory. Then Fouché proved it.

‘Though perhaps you are right. Maybe the seas are forbidden us whilst England has so much as a row-boat left. And Lord Nelson is proof against a sniper’s bullet now. But there is more than one way to skin a cat—or flay a nation. In any case, you follow my argument: we have diverted vast resources to the Egyptian’s demands. Diverted elsewhere they might have succoured several campaigns. Now, if what you say is true it may be of inestimable value—and I use the term advisedly—to our cause.’

‘Which is what?’ asked Julius, opportunistic as any fake mummy dealer.

‘Which is confidential,’ replied Fouché, sealing off that promising avenue. ‘Although you may safely consider it to be no petty project. On the contrary, it is a cause of some importance…’

Frankenstein shrugged. Every human’s parochial little agenda seemed important to them. In the majority it swelled to fill their entire panorama till they could see nothing else.

‘Which, by sad extension,’ Fouché concluded, ‘makes you important to us.’ He snapped his notebook shut. ‘Congratulations.’

Even Fouché’s standard tones suggested that a heart of stone lurked beneath his stone-coloured coat. Now he emphasised the point. And despite that being absolutely no surprise, Frankenstein’s stomach squirmed. It was the first time that had happened in some while. Did it mean he was reacquiring an attachment to life? If so, should he be pleased or berate himself?

Therefore it was no mere curiosity that made him enquire:

‘‘Congratulations’? On what?’

Minister Fouché did not smile. Julius didn't know it, but people said he never had or would.

'On your promotion.'

'Oh, I see…,' said Julius.

'And survival,' added the Minister. 'Probably…'

* * *

The culture at Versailles was such that two enemies could not co-exist, least of all in close proximity or competition. Anything else was an insult to its survival of the fittest ethos.

Hence the vehemence of the Egyptian's letter and its furious drafting mere minutes after the fracas between him and Frankenstein. A relative innocent in such matters, Julius had not taken counter-measures, and only his incisive intellect during the interview with Minister Fouché saved him.

Now, freshly appointed as new 'Director of Research' at the palace, Frankenstein had his appointment confirmed by witnessing the previous occupant's departure. He was roused from bed and ordered to attend.

It was dawn and the rising sun glinted both on the guillotine's blade and the Egyptian's bulging eyes. Purely because of the unearthly hour and for no vindictive reason, Frankenstein was unable to suppress a yawn. The Egyptian, trussed up like a turkey ready for the blade, saw.

In his last use of his head before it was detached, the Egyptian called Julius Frankenstein something that made even the hardened executioner wince.

Chapter 8: SWORD OF DAMOCLES (2)

After that little display Frankenstein hardly needed further proof of the presiding regime's ruthlessness. Nevertheless, new and compelling evidence arrived the very next morning. That and the lesson to be very careful in your choice of words in further interviews with whoever the Bureaucrat was.

Whilst scouring his new offices clear of all traces of the Egyptian's presence Julius was informed a delivery had arrived requiring his personal attention.

It proved to be a wagon, under escort by Old Guard and also under tarpaulin. Straightaway, Frankenstein feared the worst. A cull of innocent peasants perhaps, plucked from the fields for him to start a new program of mummy-free research? Or maybe a selection of battlefield or guillotine fresh cadavers, hand-picked to be of fit-for-an-Emperor quality?

Julius cautiously sniffed over the draped tarpaulin. The fall of the material and lack of stench suggested happier alternatives.

Some of the Guardsmen smiled wickedly, wrinkling their moustaches in cruel amusement. They knew but weren't saying.

'You could at least look pleased, *monsieur*,' said the most senior or shameless. 'We sweated blood to get these for you!'

They were watching and waiting. There was nothing else for it but to plunge in.

Frankenstein lifted a corner of the tarpaulin—and recoiled.

'How… how could you?' he spluttered.

*** * ***

That was, he realised even at the time, a weak and womanish thing to say. It would do the rounds of Old Guard drinking holes for years hence. Oh, how they would laugh!

For the space it took to say it, Julius didn't care. The cart did contain corpses after all, of a sort. But not the kind he was hardened to. Not the

usual abused Divine handiwork, torn into components ready for the attentions of Dr. Frankenstein.

And yet that same Dr. Frankenstein, who'd worked on the very worst that robbed graves could offer with unchanged expression and undiminished appetite, could now hardly bring himself to look.

At the same time it was sickeningly brought home to him how far he'd come, how far he'd sunk, and the barbarians he'd sold his talents to. Here and now, spread before his appalled gaze, were the fruits of all those concessions and compromises.

Julius now recalled with great force the Bureaucrat noting his suggestion about how lenses would speed the sun-drying process. Accordingly, an order must have been framed and soldiers sent out. Merely a footling detail in the daily round of Government.

But also a most memorable day, surely, for the observatories that were ransacked as a result. All the signs indicated little patience and still less compunction. Where mountings had been too troublesome to detach, they'd simply been wrenched off, or hacked away by sword.

After all, it was only the lenses that were required. What did blade marks on the telescopes matter when their insides had to come out anyway?

Frankenstein chilled himself considering the streamlined logic of it. He declined to look too closely lest he see astronomers' blood on their kidnapped babies, or severed hands still gripping tightly.

There must be several whole observatories worth here—major ones too, judging by the scale of the instruments. One casual causal word from Dr Frankenstein and all astronomical endeavour in a broad swathe round Paris had ceased. Yet another of his family's glorious contributions to science!

Julius' thoughts had raced far in a short time; a wobbly tightrope walk over an abyss. Meanwhile, back in the material world, the soldiers were still chuckling at his expense.

'How "could" we?' mimicked their spokesman, a man with a rift valley of a scar down his brow, ending in the obliteration of an eye. 'How could we? Well, its pretty simply, ain't it lads? 'Specially when you've got a decent sized axe!'

It was like a bucket of cold water in the face to Julius, a necessary corrective. Quite inadvertently, while only intending to being cruel they had been kind.

Julius realised that he was the odd one out, the one individual out of step in the parade of life, not them. Outwardly at least he must confirm his pace with theirs.

He reached into the cart and heaved out a murdered telescope. He peered down the tube that would see the stars no more. The lens lurking inside must be eight centimetres breadth or more—the pride of some observatory or wealthy amateur. Then he cradled it in his arms and beamed.

‘Perfect!’ he said, praising the vandals.

‘You like it?’ queried their scarred spokesman, a mite saddened that the fun seemed over.

‘I love it. I wish you’d got more. Now take the lot to the workshops and have them strip the glass out…’

* * *

It was a mark of his success that Frankenstein got to meet the man he termed ‘the Bureaucrat’ again. His first impressions were confirmed by subsequent discreet enquiries. This gentleman only arrived from the outside world in circumstances of some secrecy and great need, for the ‘alphas and omegas’ of Versailles: the launching and ending of projects and careers—and people too, probably. Julius ought to have been honoured—and to have guessed.

He got part way, in speculating that ‘the Bureaucrat’ was somehow linked to the Conventionary Government. Normally, to observe the constitutional decencies, it kept its distance from Napoleon’s operation, but earlier that day Julius had observed state coaches deliver high-ups for consultations. Maybe his Bureaucrat had been amongst them.

Whatever the case, by the time Julius was summoned the rest were gone, although their presence lingered on in the form of minor changes of scenery. The marble bust of the Emperor had been put to sleep under a drape and, in deference to outside dogmas, Fouché was wearing a work costume of flamboyant tricolour cravat and cummerbund. Or rather he was in the process of removing them in haste. Which was a good idea: on him they looked like bouquets on a flood victim.

As Julius entered he was handing the offending garments to a ‘New-citizen’ dresser and being fitted with less committed substitutes.

Fouché had the knack of making all conversations seem like his first and most important of the day. It was flattering and frightening in equal proportions to be the focus of such total attention. The effect was the same as with Julius' newly constructed system of ransacked lens, now up on the Palace roof sun-drying serum-soaked strips of meat. Everything was both speeded up and intensified.

Julius had already mentally girded himself for a 'mauvais demi-heure' of carefully watched words and potential pitfalls. It was like dining with someone you knew to be homicidal—sometimes. From second to second the question arose, what use would he put his knife to next?

'How are things proceeding would you say?' said Fouché, without preamble, sitting down and arranging the few items on his desk into perfection-plus. 'Well or not well?'

'Well.'

That got noted in the little golden notepad, like it was either an admission or wisdom worth preserving. Or maybe, once down in written form it could actually be considered as real.

'Yes,' said Fouché, after leisurely delay. 'That is my assessment also. And, more importantly, it is likewise the Emperor's opinion. He has confided in me. He has noticed a difference. Therefore you will too.'

'In what way?'

Fouché indicated something above Julius' head. Julius looked but could see nothing but air and then a baroque ceiling.

'An extra thread securing the sword of Damocles over you,' the unsuspected Minister explained. 'A slight strengthening of its suspension…'

Dear old Damocles again. He'd hovered over Frankenstein so long they were almost pals. Julius recalled Sir Percy Blakeney wielding that weapon at the Heathrow Hecatomb. Clearly, certain types kept it close to hand in their armoury of cliché.

Frankenstein pretended he had not looked for the dangling threat.

'But not its removal…,' he said.

Fouché laughed—an involuntary bark—at the very idea. Then, to cover his lapse, he gestured towards the still shrouded bust.

'Fifi: deal with that…'

The Lazaran-maid was beyond being pleased now, but had duty as an entire substitute. She shambled over and ensured the Emperor's marble

gaze presided over all again.

‘Specifically,’ Fouché continued, his perfect, polished, self again, ‘His Imperial Highness reports additional clarity of thought, particularly in the evening. He attributes this to prior dining on your infusions. Which, incidentally, are so much more palatable than the Egyptian’s delicacies…’

Which may have been either simple stating of fact, or a hint that he knew Frankenstein had nothing more to put on the table. Corn-fed beef tasted better than long dead human: hardly a revelation! Yet that improvement might convince those who wanted to believe it had yet further benefits…

Frankenstein stepped in to derail that particular train.

‘I am pleased that his Highness is pleased,’ he said—but he thought: ‘Imagination? Wishful thinking? Perhaps a sliver of 1% improvement that his serum-thirsty body picks up on and exaggerates? Or relief at no more mummy-meat? Either way it can’t last…’

Whatever else he might be or look like, ‘the Bureaucrat’ was a remarkable man, worth every sous of the fortune they probably paid him. Either he could read minds or, almost as bad, he understood.

‘And I am pleased that you are pleased,’ said Frankenstein’s shark-smooth opponent. ‘However, it cannot last.’

Despite himself, Julius was taken aback. He tried to stem it but it probably showed.

‘It can’t?’

Fouché shook his head.

‘No. You must surely know that his Imperial Excellency expects initial perfection, followed by continuous improvement. It is not reasonable but it is so. That being so, what fresh wonders can you offer us?’

By then Frankenstein had recovered and replaced his social interaction mask.

‘Draw up a list of required miracles,’ he said, ‘and I’ll see what I can do for you.’

It was the right reply—a bold counter-attack in keeping with the martial spirit of the place. It brought him time and an unknowable delay in meeting the Egyptian’s radical redundancy.

‘I will do so,’ said Fouché, and jotted it down as a ‘to do’ item. ‘In the meanwhile, may I inform you that there is an English couple making frantic

efforts to trace your good self. Should I encourage or deter them, do you think? On your behalf. Or perhaps I should deal with them…'

At which point Julius gave up pretending he could be this man's equal or even play in the same league. Better to just ride the tide and see where it washed you up.

He consoled himself with the thought that he was just one individual in an age increasingly hostile to individuals. Whereas the Bureaucrat was an exceptional talent tapped into a huge amoral conspiracy.

'A Lazaran woman,' Julius ventured, 'but of aristocratic manner? Plus a prize fighter?'

'You describe them perfectly, *monsieur*. I may steal your admirably concise pen-portraits for my report…'

And he seemed to do just that, writing them down in his little book-world.

Julius searched within for the answer of his heart but found no strong opinions.

'I'd… rather you didn't harm them…,' he said, then realised that was weak. Would it be enough to save? Ada had used and humiliated him, but he didn't wish her dead (again).

'Au contraire,' replied Fouché. 'At the moment, only our protection is protecting them from harm. We thought they might be your friends. If not, then the Convention can have them. The pair think they are clever and camouflaged, but to those with eyes to see their presence stands out like a whore in a monastery. Or shit on a wedding cake…'

Neither similes made Julius smile. He was sure Lady Lovelace was doing her very best, but in current company that best just wasn't good enough.

'Your departure from the Compeigne Mausoleum greatly puzzled the English couple,' Fouché went on. 'As it did many others. Indeed, it is a tribute to their modest talents, plus promiscuous bribery, that their curiosity has come closer to satisfaction than all other competing enquiries. By the way, are they friends of yours?'

'Travelling companions,' said Julius. 'Formerly.'

'But not friends.'

'No.'

'Or colleagues?

'No.'

‘Or agents of British intelligence? Or any other intelligence apparatus?’

‘No and no.’

Each response was recorded. Therefore Julius felt he should add:

‘As far as I know.’

Fouché’s fish-eyes lifted from the page. They held no capacity for fellow-feeling. And as for empathy…

‘That is all any of us can vouchsafe, *monsieur* Frankenstein. I took it as said. Meanwhile, in the light of what you say, I presume you are content for their nosings to meet a brick wall…’

‘So long as it is a metaphorical one,’ said Julius.

Fouché was almost—but not quite—amused. He teetered on the brink for a second but then recovered. Julius would have liked to have seen that, if only as reassurance that humanity cannot be entirely scoured from a soul.

‘Just so,’ Fouché confirmed for Julius’ comfort. ‘A symbolic wall then. Not one for being shot against. La! What a low opinion of us you have gained! Where on earth do you people get such notions from? The Emperor’s service is a happy one. Everyone in the Palace of Versailles is happy to be here…’

The Minister of Police looked at Julius again, his expression exactly as before.

‘Otherwise,’ he added, ‘one way or another, they have to go.’

*** * ***

The cobweb spun at Loseley house twitched. However, the human spider at its centre was too old and wily to just rush out rejoicing. He knew full well that not everything that got caught in his sticky strands was food to feed on. Bigger bugs had been known to imitate the writhings of victims so as to set a trap within a trap.

Such wisdom derived not just from the wonderful word of metaphor but observations of the actual world. Back in France of the Ancien Regime, as a club-footed and thus reject scion of nobility (from whom nothing was expected, to whom nothing would come), he’d had leisure to sit and watch Nature at work. In the end it proved a better education that his perfect siblings had from their expensive schools. From it he deduced that as

Mammams went Nature was an excellent but icy parent, quite unconcerned about her individual offspring's welfare. There were no kind words or cuddles for failure, and it entirely sufficed if somehow, anyhow, enough survived and the show went on.

The young Talleyrand drew his own conclusions from that, very different from those offered either by the Church or 'Enlightenment' philosophes. These same firm convictions had then stayed with him, unmodified, throughout life, to the great benefit of his career (if not his immortal soul).

Germane to the current situation, in the gardens of the family chateau at Perigord, he'd once observed a bird peck upon a web to draw forth its maker, and then gobble up the deluded arachnid. Right to its final moment Talleyrand didn't doubt the spider believed itself as oh so wise, sitting there awaiting dinner to come to it. Instead, in a second, it was dinner; the vibrations attending its death agony rapidly fading away, leaving its web deserted to fall into decay.

There was a lesson there for those with the mental strength to see.

Thus enlightened, Prince Talleyrand waited until the reverberations thrumming in from his own imaginary web's widespread strands made recognisable sounds. He delayed still further until repetition converted sounds into music. Then, recognising the tune from past experience, he interpreted. But it was only when those interpretations were confirmed by other means that the Prince felt free to act.

It sounds like a timid and tedious and lengthy process, but was not. It occupied only the time taken up by that day's first cup of chocolate and perusing that night's dinner menu proposals. And no one present would have guessed that the Prince was not giving his full attention to either (highly important) activity.

If so, they were deceived. The short interlude of sipping and selecting enabled Talleyrand to summon his secretary and, without hesitation, dictate a crisp, memoirs-worthy, memo that shifted forces the length and breadth of Europe.

All change. His agents were to draw back. Good and faithful (or well paid…) servants though they were, they had been detected. Which didn't matter till now. But now had become then and there was a new now. What didn't matter then now did. All very simple, A.B.C. stuff.

Next, because at heart (deep deep down, when he could be, if circumstances permitted and all other things being equal) he was a kind man, Talleyrand composed additional missives to his auxiliary agents; those who worked for him unwittingly. True, he was in no position to guarantee the safety of anyone involved, or even materially effect their fate, but he could at least save them from being prey to anxiety.

Talleyrand held it as one of his few fixed beliefs that an anxious life was a fate worse than death. As a former bishop he was aware that Christ's most frequent instruction as reported by Scripture did not concern belief or prayer or that ill-defined quality called love, but the simple command: 'do not be afraid.'

Who was Talleyrand, a mere man of the world, an unworthy (and indeed excommunicated) Christian, to dispute that emphasis?

Accordingly he wrote.

The letter to Lady Lovelace was short and unsigned. In fact, it contained but one word:

'Bravo!'

Whereas to Frankenstein he was more forthcoming. Four-fold so. Julius got a whole sentence.

Chapter 9: IN PHARAOH'S BOUDOIR

Julius received and read it by candlelight.

Just before, he'd been surveying a moonlit segment of Versailles revealed through a cobwebbed window. First, baroque masonry and statuary, then a maze, riotous fountains (albeit dry), formal gardens (plus NCOs' latrine), and an orangery. Still beautiful, though raddled or raped, their original aims remained latent, just waiting to dispense joy, even though water, blooms and fruit be gone.

But what noble thoughts and/or lively ladies had he courted in any of them? What attitudes or garters had he adjusted there? Answer: none.

There was the excuse of being confined, but excuse was what it was. Julius had never tried to truant in those gardens because he lacked will and skill for the thoughts and garters things. Like a metaphor for the rest of creation, the Palace of Versailles lay spread for his delectation, available as a whore in bed, but also unvisited as the Moon which lit it.

Instead, Frankenstein spent his spare time with the dead. Mixing with his own sort, some wits said: getting in some practise for the imminent real thing.

He was in the 'Pharaoh's Bedroom': actually an obscure lumber room renamed in jest when it became home to the sarcophagi required by the Egyptian (RIP) and his mumbo-jumbo. There they now resided, gathering dust, a long way from their contents' intended resting place, whilst someone (presumably) decided what on earth to do with them.

It was a problem. There was no wish to advertise possession of the stuff, and putting mummies out with the rubbish was fairly certain to excite comment, even amongst the wine-fuddled sorts who worked the refuse carts. One mooted option was a Viking-style mass funeral pyre and barbeque, which would at least be entertaining.

More sober minds suggested discreet reburial, one by one, night after night, in local churchyards. There was, they pointed out, ample space in those since the Revivalists got access to them…

Alternatively, it could just be left for the next owners of Versailles to discover and worry about. What, someone reasonably asked, were a few more decades or even centuries of limbo to those who occupied the boxes?

The bandaged former royalty didn’t eat or excrete, they didn’t wander about and they never complained. Which made them perfect guests by the standards of the Palace. Why stir them and everything else up unnecessarily?

To date that question hadn’t had good answer. Since there was lot else going on, it probably never would. Future archaeologists might find half of the Valley of the Kings in the ruins of Versailles and draw all sorts of wrong conclusions.

Meanwhile, Frankenstein had taken to keeping the mummies company when he wanted to think clearly. The jumbled contents of the room helped him to acquire perspective about his own petty troubles. Long ago, these presumably important people had strutted and fretted their hour upon the stage, and afterwards careful provision had been made, and great expense incurred, to get them safe to Heaven. Then circumstances changed and someone else’s agenda had led them here, first to being sliced up like salami, and then when that bright notion was ditched, to abandonment in careless disorder. In the stock market of life (or afterlife) they’d plunged from precious commodities to the junk-shares nobody trusted. And it showed.

The jars and sarcophagi had been stacked higgledy-piggledy by, Julius surmised, servants with no respect for them and even less liking for the task. Lids were askew and partially unwrapped limbs protruded. It was like being in a field hospital’s failures zone after a battle, save for the smell. Rather than the reek of fresh death, here was the scent of ancient dust and long centuries patiently waiting in the dark for… what?

Appropriately enough, it was ‘waiting’ that Julius had come here to ponder on. How long would he have to wait before he was found out again? The Heathrow Hecatomb had been comparatively slow; the Compeigne Mausoleum less so. All the indications were that the Emperor’s establishment was an super-streamlined place. When the breakthroughs failed to arrive on a daily basis he would be asked why—and soon. And in no uncertain manner.

That being so, how long did he have? And what should he do in the interval? There was his ‘collection’ (of which more anon) to preoccupy him, but that was nearly complete. What else could he profitably do? Grow a stylish beard perhaps? Would there be time? And when his head rolled into the guillotine’s basket did he want it to be wearing a beard in any case?

Answer came there none to either big or banal questions. Which was perhaps why, since he was feeling so low in spirits, Fate stepped in to suggest a solution: just so he would keep going and still provide it with amusement.

Someone slid a letter under the door.

Julius heard the rustle of paper and looked up in time to see the missive finish its horizontal journey. Unhurried footsteps receded down the corridor beyond the door.

Unless he'd been followed—and wary Julius didn't think he had—no one knew he was here. No one else came to this place at all: the lower echelons thought it haunted and the ambitious shunned the remnants of an out of favour project. Either his habits had been the subject of close study (Why? By who?) or someone was writing letters to mummies.

Frankenstein had an opinion on which was more likely. He launched himself from his repose against the sarcophagus of a Ptolemaic high priest.

His repose-to-launch speed wasn't fast enough. By the time he'd flung the door open the messenger had rounded the corner and was gone. The only other person visible was the girl who collected the chamber-pots—and she was a simpleton.

'You girl!'

She'd had her back to him. The lumpy child jumped and spilled liquid from her burdened tray onto the carpet.

'Who was just here?' said Julius. 'Did you see them?'

The girl had just enough courage to face the frightening man but insufficient to answer him. She chewed on her lip. The tray wobbled ominously.

As a doctor Frankenstein had previous experience of these 'innocents.' Her oriental eyes were wide and when he looked within there were all the indicators. So, definitely not her…

Also, he hated to distress her—and there was the carpet to think about too.

'It doesn't matter, my dear. Carry on.'

He retired back into the lumber room and shut the door.

If she weren't so self-controlled, the chamber-pot girl-would have smirked.

*** * ***

Frankenstein had high hopes. Whoever it was had gone to great effort. It should be good.

He cracked the thin sliver of a seal, unfolded the luxurious paper, and read. It didn't take long.

Julius flipped the letter to check he was reading the right side, but the choice was still between the two words of his name and, overleaf, two more words comprising a message. Sort of.

'Probe deeper.'

it said. And then, doubling the word count.

'PS: (and higher)'

As a suggestion for what to do with the balance of his life it lacked detail. It was also light of a signature, compounding what Frankenstein saw as borderline bad manners.

Repaying it in kind, Julius rolled his correspondence into a cylinder and stuffed it into a crack in the coffin of Seti Nefihotep, a twentieth dynasty middle-ranking scribe. Not that the identification was known to Frankenstein, but it just seemed a suitable repository. Nothing so dramatic had happened in that container for over three thousand years.

Inadvertently, the useless, enigmatic, letter helped Julius come to a decision. This dead Egyptian, who must have had his own troubles in his day, would be his role model in accepting whatever transpired with quiet dignity. Every man came to the same place in due course anyway.

Frankenstein left the inhabitants of the lumber room to their peaceful slumber and strode out into the sunlight and days to come.

Chapter 10: LUST-CRAZED NURSES

For all his boldness in certain fields, Julius's 'days to come' might still have been wasted in wool-gathering till the much-mentioned sword poised above his head dropped. Although a man who might rob a bank (for a third-party!) on impulse, or shoot a officer of the law likewise, he was relaxed to a fault when it came to his own interests. There are penalties as well as comforts in a profound belief in Fate.

'Know Thyself' said the Ancients; a precept they considered the summit of wisdom. Well, Julius knew himself all right. With his little collecting project (of which more later) almost 'done and dusted' there was insufficient to sedate the sleeping beast of his brain. If should it awake, famished, and find no meat nearby, it might start to feed on itself again, as at Heathrow. Frankenstein couldn't face that. Not great chunks of his personality self-digesting. There was need of alternative focus.

Like the letter he'd received, for instance. That might do. He deliberately let it prey on his mind. The almost insulting brevity, as much as its anonymity, helped. Like Chinese water torture, the drip drip drip repetition of its minimalist message came to demand even more attention than a fulsome screed might. Finally, its repetitious whispered suggestion started to sound like good advice. Then a day of pretend-resisting that gave it the weight of a command. The nest step up from there was crusade…

Which was precisely the intention of its wickedly clever creator.

Seti Nefihotep's stoic example was forgotten. Though still the hapless victim of ever changing moods, though still a devout disciple of Destiny, it became obvious to Frankenstein that his only alternative was standing still, awaiting the inevitable—and precious little good that had done him so far. Fate operated to its own timetable, which wasn't always ideal for those who tried to travel by it. You couldn't rely on a Lady Lovelace or Old Guard kidnapping detail to arrive when you wanted one…

Therefore…

'Probe higher,' the letter said—and so Julius did.

* * *

As a man who often perused the Holy Koran (looking for loopholes), the Egyptian (dec'd) might have enlightened Frankenstein from day one.

'There are signs for those who look…'

is a frequent refrain: with the emphasis on the volitionary '*would*.'

It transpired that the advice of both letter and Holy book was sound. When Julius at long last looked he saw. And once he saw he investigated.

Whereupon one thing led to another, like links in a chain: a stout chain either leading him on—or dragging him in. What he found then chimed with all the other little things he'd noticed but not noted until now: images stored away in the 'something wrong with this picture' section of Julius' brain. Like, for instance, the successive servings at luncheon, the excess chefs and crockery for the visible number of staff, the extraneous servant bells: all things he's put down, insofar as he thought of them at all, to the French failing of obsessing about food. Belatedly, they now elbowed their way to the front of the picture and shouted 'Hey you! Look here! Significant!'

It started in this way. Being a man with escape on his mind, Julius was prone to register doors, and in a palace the size of Versailles there was no shortage of them, of every kind, to collect. Julius specifically spotted those in frequent use and soon got to see what lay behind them, if only in glimpses.

Others, the more intriguing, seemed under-unemployed and remained mysteries to him, to greater or lesser degree. 'Lesser' applied to those plainly leading to the little kingdoms of Versailles' servile staff: the refuges where they stored their mops and buckets and hid from onerous duties. 'Greater' referred to those barriers as grand as the rest but which stayed strangely shut. Julius put a mental mark against those and, one by one, when no one was looking, tried them out.

That meant discreetly kissing a large number of frogs in hope of finding a prince. Most had good reason for disuse: such as mothballed ballrooms and banqueting halls awaiting a monarch who danced or ate in company. Either that or the doors led the long way to somewhere and so were shunned by Palace staff with a world to conquer and always moving at maximum speed.

But there was one in particular that had Julius intrigued. He never observed it in use but detected the carpet before it was worn. Therefore, that

one he saved up till last, reserving it for when his confidence in the mystery letter's instruction was as threadbare as that square of carpet.

Thus it was only later on in his new nosiness, when momentarily alone in the corridor, that he grasped the nettle. He also grasped the door handle and swung it open.

'Bingo!'—the English would say.

A sentinel stood right behind. Behind that member of the Old Guard stairs ascended into the heights. Up those stairs there was a fleeting glimpse of structure and the movement of many limbs.

The Guardsman had been meditating, or whatever it was career elite-soldiers do when in standby mode. He stood startled. Things likewise stood in the balance.

Frankenstein had prepared for every eventuality. Before the man had time to prise his shoulder off the wall Julius had said 'sorry,' complemented by an innocent and apologetic look. Before any opportunity for the challenge 'who goes there? Julius had shut the door and was gone.

Less than a second had elapsed. A short enough span for a sentry who'd fallen down on the job to convince himself the lapse might not matter—or maybe hadn't happened at all…

Shoulder-blades only slightly clenched, Julius continued down the corridor as fast as a casual pace could take him.

As he walked he listened out for the sound of the door opening, but peace reigned for two, then three, then four whole seconds—after which it would never come. The feared bullet or bayonet failed to arrive and prove that clenching is a useless reflex against express-delivery metal. Both Julius and his new knowledge survived.

Two turns of corner later he'd gained the cover of other people. Soon after that he'd slotted himself back into his timetable and was exactly where a trustworthy Palace employee with full buy-in to the Imperial project should be right then. Thereafter he was invulnerable unless the Guardsman wanted to make an issue of his own lapse and implicate himself. Which was unlikely, if Julius' upbringing amongst soldiers was anything to go by.

Which in turn meant Frankenstein was free to consider the implications of his discovery. An apparently disused door with a sentinel behind it? The very height of discretion and serpentine thoughts! The thinker of those thoughts did not wish that door known about.

Being an obliging fellow, Frankenstein forgot all about it for a while.

* * *

That ‘while’ equalled about a day. During that time it was still just about possible the Guardsman might have a change of heart. Whilst light lasted Julius made sure he stayed near a high-up means of exit—from Versailles and life. Likewise, for the whole of the night that followed he dozed fully dressed in an armchair, booted and ready for the hammering on his door which meant he had been informed upon. That way he could hurl himself to a mercifully swift doom and at least die with dignity. Otherwise, he didn’t doubt that the Emperor’s curiosity about his curiosity would be persistent and painful.

Yet the next morning came, as it tends to, and Frankenstein found himself still alive, albeit unrefreshed. Time to resume work.

Blowing up that slightly ragged feeling into full-blown illness, Frankenstein swung lead. He asked for and secured the day off. No one seemed suspicious: on the contrary, the man who Julius in his slowness still called ‘the Bureaucrat’ feigned humanity and sent a servant with tonics and a message asking if there was anything else he could do.

There was. Julius requested some bottles of the finest vintage in the Palace cellars. Hardly a standard cold cure but he was Swiss and therefore strange, and he was amongst Frenchmen with a predisposition to smile on any request concerning wine. Therefore no one turned a hair, the bottles arrived and Frankenstein set to work.

It was a proven technique for emergencies: not swift, granted, but as sure as anything could be in this uncertain world. Julius made himself comfortable and methodically constructed a trap for his perverse mind.

To start with, that comprised assuming a relaxed position, lolling on a chaise-longue and preparing for a long wait if need be. Plus sip sip sipping at the fine wine to lull the brain’s tricky tendencies. An unlikely, languid looking, sort of trap therefore, but none the less effective for that.

To bait it required one indispensable component: a delectable thought. If Julius was sufficiently inventive and the thought delectable enough, he could have sat on a spike and imbibed neat caffeine and yet still the trap would have worked. Assistance of the upholstery and alcohol kind simply streamlined matters.

First Frankenstein recalled what little he’d seen through the curiously guarded door. Which equalled less than a second’s worth of visual

information—and most of that involving a moustachioed man's surprised face. Oh, and some stairs. Of the wider scene and detail he had next-to-nothing, or so he thought. However, the eye takes in more than the mind recalls—without prompting. Julius let the recollection hover in his forebrain for a moment and then dismissed it as if of no importance. 'I'm not interested in that!' he misinformed his consciousness.

The trap was set. Now to show a red rag to a bull.

Frankenstein daydreamed as he drank and soon enough, less than a bottle in, he hit upon a delectable thought.

It isn't necessary to intrude on his privacy further than to say it involved the nursing staff of the first hospital he studied at, when the juvenile Julius was awash with hormones and the female of the species was a novelty to him. Since early impressions run deep he remembered their faces and forms as though it were yesterday. One thing led to another and then… the delectable thought was with him! Somewhat shop-worn through over-use but still good.

What if, he wondered, both at the time and periodically since, what if some strange erotic affliction should descend on all the nurses simultaneously? Perhaps some spell cast on them by Pan or Bacchus—although explanation was hardly important. It was the consequences… What sights would be seen that day if they suddenly beheld the world—and, yes, yes, yes, each other—through the red mist of utterly uncontrollable lust? Oh baby…!

A notion to conjure with! A feast of food for thought, an image to treasure—and myriad other metaphors that needn't delay him. More importantly, the delectable thought sauntered into Julius' imagination, rudely shouldering aside everything else, and took up sole occupation.

It is a comment on the likelihood of lasting happiness in this life that Frankenstein's brain objected. Like one half of a sour marriage, a wife hearing her husband laugh at a party and demanding they leave early, it felt threatened by the other partner's pleasure. It intervened in no uncertain manner—as he had hoped it would.

And so…

The thing he'd first thought of—and cunningly rejected in favour of reverie—now came hurtling back like a steam train. It 'chanced' to be the first bit of ammunition that Julius' brain had to hand. A perfect image of the

scene behind the secret door rocketed into his mind's eye, evicting all the naughty nurses.

Frankenstein swooped. He seized the scene, he devoured its detail before his mind could realise it had been tricked. He looked around, above and behind the startled Old Guardsman and he memorised what he'd seen but not noticed at the time.

Too late, Frankenstein's brain perceived it had been had. It tried to withdraw the additional detail that should have been buried in unconscious memory—but Julius had his claws in it. A pathetic offer of having the nurses back, in slow motion plus close-ups, failed to detach him.

Julius sat up. He set down his glass.

So, that's how it was!

The stairs went up, that much he recalled before, but the extra detail of the worn stair carpet was revealing. The place was much frequented. And the movement he'd semi-seen, that resolved itself into people—of a sort. The Guardsman remained the only living thing behind the door but he had company in the form of Lazarans. A host of them in gaudy imperial uniform, corralled behind the bars of a treadmill working the cage of a lift mechanism. So, heavy burdens went up and down to wherever the stairs led. Or else the route was taken by VIPs too VI to ascend like mere mortals.

There was more. There was also something wrong with the kidnapped image. It wasn't in the viewing of it but some other aspect: a dog that didn't bark…

Frankenstein shut his outer eyes and in his mind's equivalent reached for the wrongness. That mind was sullen and uncooperative now, but as a bare minimum stayed still for its owner to frisk it.

Soon he understood. The picture was almost a silent one! Aside from the Guardsman's gasp and his own 'sorry' there was no other soundtrack. But there should have been…

Lazarans lamented constantly; perhaps without knowing they did it. It was a feature of all but the best of the breed. Early on in people's acquaintance with the Revived it could drive warm-bloods mad, until they managed to tune it out. Some folk never could manage that trick and vainly tried to whip the habit out of their Lazaran property, or else gave up ownership in despair. A common comparison was to the noise of a barking dog: one that never tired and could mimic mankind. It wore you down…

This lot didn’t do it. They were mute. Their mouths lolled open, as per standard, but nothing emerged save their tongues. Or not even that…

Frankenstein still had the picture vivid before him. He zoomed in and found explanation.

Those tongues were clipped—savagely so. And the throats he saw bore the marks of rough surgery. Someone had felt the need to silence these living lift-mechanisms; had gone to the great trouble of extracting tongues and voice-boxes. Frankenstein even spotted signs of total trachea-blocks: which meant they wouldn’t be able to ‘eat’ and wouldn’t last long.

Which meant… which meant their owners were not only cruel but desired utmost discretion in the duties they assigned to them.

Which in turn meant Frankenstein had stumbled onto something important—no, extra important—in an already supremely important place. What went on in Versailles was always secret to the world outside. Embarrassed by what he was and their need for him, the Convention kept Napoleon’s role as understated as they could. But this, this was a secret within a secret: Versailles’ own private secret that maybe even the Convention didn’t know about. Goodness knows where it might lead!

Inspired partly by the letter he had received—but mostly by his strong streak of madness—Frankenstein resolved to find out where.

Chapter 11: WHAT THE BUTLER SAW

‘I see him! I see him! I think…’

Foxglove went through the motions of believing her. So far during their surveillance of Versailles Lady Lovelace averaged a dozen sightings of Dr Frankenstein per day—and every one a false alarm. It was instructive that her confidence in each announcement never diminished. That in-bred belief that the world would do what she wanted it to explained why Ada was ruling class and Foxglove served her.

But such subversive thoughts were far from the loyal retainer, probably no more than one percent of his conscious faculties. The balance obliged him to oblige her.

‘Really, milady?’

‘Really! I think it is him! He’s in the low adjunct wing with few windows—just where you’d expect a covert laboratory…’

‘May I, milady?’

Though reluctant to lose sight of her quarry lest he vanish like some will o’ the wisp, Ada indicated Foxglove ‘may.’ He gently disengaged the telescope from her eye.

‘Hurry, don’t miss him!’ she said. ‘The third slit window along. He is side on to it, discoursing to some unseen party…’

Foxglove focused and then sighed.

‘Well, up to a point, milady. Although I recall Herr Frankenstein as a younger man, and taller, and slimmer. And if it is him then the sparse white hair is a fresh development. Perhaps some terrible experience at Versailles has transformed the man. And aged him. And shrunk him…’

Used to only hearing ‘yes’ or even ‘yes, three bags full,’ Lady Lovelace knew when she was being humoured to the point of insolence.

‘Give me that!’

She seized back the scope and looked again. The extra information provided by Foxglove enabled her brain to make better sense of the fuzzy shape at the window. It was as he’d said. Unless Frankenstein had been cut off at the ankles, force-fed like a *foi-gras* goose and then traumatised, she’d mistaken some fat little gnome of a man for him.

‘Well, perhaps not then…,’ Ada conceded. She’d admit that single mistake but not the greater fact that her eyesight had been impaired through excessive reading by candlelight.

‘Just so, madam.’ Foxglove resumed his repose beneath the tree. ‘But I don’t doubt your persistence will triumph in due course. Eventually…’

Suddenly, Ada couldn’t share that optimism or blind faith in her indomitable will. She raised the telescope again but neither heart or eye was in it.

‘He’s in there somewhere…,’ she said, mostly to herself, but Foxglove accepted delivery too.

‘Presumably, milady. So our best enquiries would suggest. If still alive…’

Ada flashed him one of her looks. He’d touched upon a possibility not to be countenanced. Frankenstein must be alive because she wanted it so, and she wanted it so because only he could lead to real serum: royal serum. And only that enhanced stuff, fit for Emperors, could give her back the sentience she desired above everything.

Longing for her old level of living burned like lust inside her. It stirred her up, it fired her dead veins till she felt like her heart pumped at pre-mortem rates again. But that was only a temporary fix: she had to have this all the time, always…

Frankenstein was the key—but a rusty key that refused to turn smoothly for her, even when she’d not mislaid it like now.

A fleeting extra surge of fire within, part fear, part frustration, inspired Ada to action. What profit had there been from all this subtlety; all this lurking in the undergrowth of Palace grounds, all the bribing of low grade Palace flunkies for snippets? False leads, dashed hopes, sore eyes, soiled clothes and empty purses, that’s what. She should never has listened to Foxglove who’d proposed such a policy. Or leastways, he’d not argued strongly enough against it…

Now that she reflected, Lady Lovelace saw clearer than she ever would down a telescope. That ‘key’ must be found, even if it meant turning the world upside down. Then it must be made to turn in the lock, even if it meant applying force. The way must be cleared!

Must: a good and vigorous word. What was she doing? Must had no place hiding in the hedgerows!

Ada snapped the telescope shut. Foxglove, who had the gift of prophecy as far as she was concerned, started to scramble to his feet and prepare a protest.

‘He’s in there somewhere,’ Ada repeated. ‘And therefore so must we be.…’

‘Therefore,’ said a fresh voice, who’d used the telescope’s closing click to mask the cocking of his pistol, ‘perhaps you’ll permit me to escort you in, madame…’

His English was good for a Frenchman, his position of advantage even better. Lady Lovelace found a gun lightly resting against her brow before she could move a muscle. Foxglove ditto, courtesy of the new arrival’s friends who now emerged from the greenery.

It was a tribute to their collective skills that so many could surround so few without the few knowing. How long, Ada wondered, had they been there, listening and watching them watch? Not that it mattered much now…

When all else is lost, poise can still remain: a fig-leaf of self-respect. Careful to move slowly and without the slightest threat, Ada curtsied her thanks for the offer.

‘I should be delighted, *monsieur*.’

The levity ended there. That one exchange had probably spent the soldier’s annual supply. His moustache bristled.

‘That mood will soon pass, spy bitch,’ he said.

*** * ***

‘You disappoint me,’ said Fouché. ‘Please don’t disappoint me.’

He hadn’t the stomach for the interrogation room and had swiftly withdrawn, handkerchief clapped to his nose against its accumulated perfume of sweat and fear. Yet, out of sight of the gory details, he nevertheless was ravenous for its end-products, like a devotee of sausage suppressing abattoir thoughts.

However, it wasn’t meat Fouché hungered for, but information—a substance he was addicted to. Mentally, he was salivating freely.

‘It is a simple question, Herr Frankenstein,’ said Fouché. ‘Are they the former travelling companions you previously referred to? Yes or no?’

‘Yes,’ said Julius, distracted. Over time, the superficially cultured life of Versailles had lulled him into forgetfulness: forgetfulness of the Egyptian’s fate and the shocking telescopes incident. Now the sudden stripping off of the silk glove to reveal the fist beneath disarmed him.

‘Pardon, *monsieur*?’ said Fouché. ‘You speak too softly.’

True enough. Julius’s voice was a whisper and easily drowned out by the screams from behind the door.

‘I said yes. It’s them.’

Fouché noted that in his golden book. Frankenstein wanted to ram it so far down the man’s throat that it erupted out the other end.

‘How relieved I am to hear you say that. A Lazaran lady and her thug? One such menagerie in the vicinity was remarkable enough. If you had proposed that there were two it would quite stretch my faith in you…’

In his present vulnerable state innocent words could explode in Julius’ face with extra meaning. Just a door’s breadth away, Foxglove was presently ‘stretched’ out for real, and being worked upon by experts. Their tools and ingenuity had stripped away all English reserve and speech was flowing free as his blood.

In Ada’s unfeeling flesh the torturers could get no purchase, nor transmit any messages along her dead nerves; but their imagination knew of other ways. Instead they made her watch, eyelids clamped open, in order to torment that most sensitive of human organs: the brain. It proved just as effective. She pretended to be hard but soon enough her testimony was matching Foxglove’s in eloquence.

Ada had noticed Julius come in and they exchanged glances. She might well have drawn the wrong conclusions, for whereas she was strapped to a board, skirts raised and hair deliberately messed to strip her of all dignity, he was merely under escort. To the uninstructed eye, Minister Fouché’s company did not look much like compulsion. Frankenstein started to explain but she spat at him like a cat. Which said it all. Fouché made his hasty departure and drew Julius with him.

Now, second by second, the Minister was recovering what little colour he ever had and all his oyster-style self-sufficiency. Soon he was his polished-marble self again.

‘So,’ he said, ‘may I take it that you were unaware of their intrusion?’

‘You may,’ answered Julius.

‘And that you have not solicited and encouraged it.’

‘They had no word from me.’

Fouché shook his head in distaste.

‘That is not the question I asked.’

Frankenstein considered his words. At the same time he seized the opportunity to gather his frayed edges, to be as seamless as the Bureaucrat pretended to be.

‘Very well then. I hereby affirm that I’ve had no part whatsoever in their being here…’

‘Then what do they want?’

Frankenstein wanted to shout back ‘can’t you hear the poor devils telling you?’ but did not. It wasn’t that kind of honesty that might keep him still breathing by day’s end. It was this variety:

‘Me,’ he said.

‘Why?’

‘The woman thinks I can work miracles. Or that I know a man who can.’

‘So,’ Fouché mused, ‘she is here under false pretences…’

‘No, she is here for the reason she states. However, she labours under an illusion.’

‘Which is what precisely?’

It hadn’t worked. The mix needed even more honesty: a proportion that could take it to toxic levels.

‘That I can give her life back,’ said Julius. ‘Real, full, life; as it was before. Specifically, her genius…’

The tiny golden pencil hesitated an instant before continuing to move over the notepad—but something was amiss. A second’s focus revealed it. The scratching that signalled marks being made on paper was absent. Frankenstein pondered that lack and then, without moving his face a fraction, exulted.

No matter how shrewd they thought they were, no matter how careful, excitement betrayed all. Excitement, whether it be sexual or status-based or sordid, knew ways round the mental barricades; it bypassed the personas people constructed over long years. Statesmen blew decades of painstaking advancement for five minutes madness with a floozy. Princes of the Church blasted their professed beliefs to bits to get wealth that their faith warned against. Yet in this case there was nothing of flesh or coin about it: ‘the Bureaucrat’ had scented advancement and was instantly intoxicated.

Fouché was pretending to write, for form's sake, but his mind was off the leash and running.

''Genius' you say?' he said, slightly breathless. 'And was she one?'

'Some thought so,' answered Julius. 'She certainly does. Her faith has led her all this way. To this fate.'

'And in vain? said Fouché, his voice level after the initial lapse. 'I mean regarding this 'miracle' you mention…'

It was faint but unmistakable, the hint of a ghost of an embryo of almost erotic abandonment; the incautious question blurted out despite a life-time of caution. What a powerful weapon this thing 'honesty' was for ripping through the toughest of shields! Especially when now coated with the poison of falsehood…

'Not necessarily…,' replied Julius.

'No?'

'No. Merely premature…'

The notepad was snapped shut.

'I see,' said Fouché—but he didn't. Then he departed, trying and failing to conceal urgency.

In that short and bloodless battle Frankenstein had won a great victory. He now knew what to do and that he would have revenge for what was going on behind the door even as they spoke. Most importantly, he realised he would after all survive until dawn—which was all the time he needed.

His hand had been forced, as it always needed doing, but now he was steely and implacable. He had his plan and a third party had just set it in motion. Any 'if' had been resolved; now it was merely a question of 'when.'

Julius considered the question. Lunch would be on the table soon and he was rather peckish. So, after lunch?

No. The continuing screams reminded him that now was probably best.

Chapter 12: EAT! AND BE MERRY

‘Eat,’ Julius ordered, and the Lazaran obeyed.

It was a fairly fresh specimen, still bemused by basic training. That and fuzzy memories of being a soldier before (right up to encountering an Austrian bayonet) pre-disposed it to obedience. Even before crossing the Great Divide it had been conditioned into accepting officer-class instructions. Now, after being dragged back, further tuition had broadened that to any ‘warm-blood’ in authority. They were in charge it had been told repeatedly. Lazarans who couldn’t grasp this blissfully simple message were recycled—in public, on the parade-ground, to hammer home the point.

Thus, although the former-and-once-again Frenchman’s days of appreciating food, or indeed feeling hunger at all, were gone never to return, when now told to ‘eat’ he ate. What warm-bloods told you to do could only be for your own good. And to be fair, that was sometimes true.

So, down the package went in one go, minus chewing, to be absorbed just as thoroughly as all the training had been.

Troubled by residual conscience, Frankenstein looked at the creature and muttered ‘sorry.’

But that signified nothing really, to either party. Julius didn’t mean it and was just scratching an itch. The Lazaran didn’t understand and stayed slumped in position, awaiting instructions.

Now the deed was done, Julius knew he must step lively, before the Lazaran started to receive orders from his own body that would overrule Frankenstein’s authority. He’d calculated the digestive trajectory as best a doctor may, but that same medical and Revivalist expertise also told him it was not exact science. If proceedings got underway before all was ready everything would crash in spectacular fashion.

And so:

‘Stand!’

The rest of the squad shambled up from the floor, moaning their continual dirge.

They were a fine batch from Frankenstein’s own factory. Taller, sturdier and more intact than the general run of battlefield-fruit, Julius had revived them to lusty afterlife with the strongest serum to hand.

He inspected his troops—and shook his head.

Even their mothers would be hard put to love them, just as smart uniforms couldn't gild this particular stinking-Lilly. Their mouths hung open and their eyes showed no animating light. When one moved the rest tended to imitate, even down to the direction of gaze. It gave their movements a disturbing collectivity.

And that perpetual groaning…

Frankenstein took it as personal reproach aimed at him, the man and lineage responsible for all their woes. That it was fair comment only made things worse.

But it also impelled him to act: further on and along his personal road to damnation.

'Join them,' he told the recently fed one, and the Lazaran jostled into the middle of the rest. They didn't even bother to glance at him.

'Now follow me.'

Time for one last look around his rooms, accompanied by zero regrets. Just another temporary encampment from which he wished to retrieve or remember nothing. Likewise his collecting project (of which more shortly). Before leaving that he made one last addition. Then off Julius set at the head of his circus troupe.

The Versailles community had gotten used to seeing the eminent doctor up to funny business, or leastways at the centre of peculiar scenes. Add to that a purely natural human aversion to Lazaran company, and in present circumstances Julius became almost invisible. Down numerous broad flights of stairs and along interminable gaudy corridors, he led his latest brew of less-than-life without challenge.

Which, on the minus side, left him prey to his own thoughts. The temptation to skip this detour and simply head to his ultimate destination grew stronger with each step. Any interlude—let alone one of the sort envisaged—was squaring, maybe cubing, the already massive risk.

But there's solace and virtue in keeping going, and just walking is a classic cure for melancholy. By the time they were drawing near, Frankenstein had got a grip. The realisation came to him that when even the basic danger was mad and monstrous then multiplying it didn't actually make much difference. Whatever he did, the end was probably nigh and there was cold comfort in that.

So thinking, he came to the interrogation suite. There was the usual guard before its outer door. He knew Frankenstein by sight and still more about him by repute. Presumably it was that which caused a curled lip.

‘Yes, *monsieur*?’

‘There are two trespassers under interview. I was asked to pop in and see how things are progressing.’

He wasn’t just any old guard (or Old Guard) designed to stand there and look menacing. This one was a cut above and authorised to ask questions, even exercise discretion.

‘Why?’

Julius stood his ground.

‘I knew them from outside. I can corroborate their statements.’

He was halfway there, but objections remained. A squad of them to be precise. The guard nodded at Frankenstein’s friends.

‘Why the company? I don’t see how they’ll help much…’

Julius looked back, as if he’d quite forgotten there were Lazarans trailing after him.

‘Oh, they’re for later,’ he said. ‘Duties elsewhere. They can wait here.’

You could see the guard was thinking ‘Oh joy! Their dead eyes all staring at me…’

‘I’ll check,’ he said. ‘Maybe you can take them in with you…’

Maybe, maybe not. The question was never resolved. It transpired they were not required either in or out of the room.

When the Guard cracked the door to enquire there were others more impatient than he. They got in before him. And in him.

A stiletto blade shot from the ajar gap. It penetrated the Guard’s head with an ease suggesting abnormal force. Then, generating sounds Julius vowed to forget lest he lose sleep ever after, the blade’s tip reappeared. Hello again, it might have said, protruding an inch beyond the guard’s busby, and spat blood and matter.

In fastidious reflex action, Frankenstein brushed the offending stuff from his lapel. It left a smear, a memento of the Guard’s billion+ brain cells and the memories they’d contained. Now all gone, alas, just like their former owner.

Then an arm, brawny and blood-flecked, shot out from behind the door. It encompassed the dead Guard’s neck and drew him in, like a bouncer dealing with a drunk.

If he’d been of that vast majority termed sensible, Julius would have been heading backwards at speed. However, the urgency of his mission overruled his feet. That and the fact that the arm seemed familiar.

Limbs are generic, and pretty or plain according to type rather than stand-out. However, tattoos do help people distinguish. Julius was helped to think he’d seen this one before—and in a context that was benign. Or fairly so.

Nevertheless, given what had just occurred, his staying put was an (in)action of high anti-sense—and his next act the category above that (should such exist).

Julius tapped upon the door.

‘Hello? Anyone home?’

There was and they were listening.

‘Is that…? Herr Frankenstein, is that you?’

‘It is, Foxglove, it is. How are you?’

The door was flung open. There stood Foxglove with Lady Lovelace beside him.

‘Can’t complain,’ answered the servant. ‘In the circumstances…’

Whatever the circumstances, he surely did have grounds for complaint. Life had obviously not been kind of late and what wasn’t bruise was caked blood. One eye was swollen closed but the other was clearly pleased to see a friendly face for a change.

‘No?’ said Julius. ‘Well, I’m sure you know best, Foxglove’

‘No he doesn’t,’ butted in Ada. ‘That’s my job.’

Simultaneously, both sides realised there were wider perspectives to take in. Behind Frankenstein’s ‘friendly face’ were a gaggle of dead-white ones. Behind Lady Lovelace and her flunky lay a picture of carnage.

‘How…?’ said Julius.

‘Who…?’ asked Ada.

They cancelled each other out but Julius, being a gentleman, deferred to the lady.

‘They are with me and harmless,’ he explained away his Lazaran company, before adding out of honesty: ‘for the moment. Things are afoot…’

‘Hmmm…,’ assessed Ada, just like her old self.

Julius took stock of the battlefield scene behind Ada’s shoulder. One, two, three, deceased interrogators were visible, slumped as they had fallen.

Frankenstein indicated his close study should be taken as a silent question.

‘Neither you nor God seemed minded to intervene,’ said Lady Lovelace, ‘so we had to save ourselves. Poor Foxglove couldn’t hold out much longer.’

‘But how?’ Julius persisted. The last time he’d seen them both were bound.

‘Time hung heavy whilst we scoured France for you,’ Ada said, glancing up and down the corridor to confirm privacy continued. ‘So I had this fitted.’

She lifted her right arm and let her sleeve fall. A sudden upward flick of the wrist caused the previously seen stiletto to shoot out with speed. It quivered to a halt mere inches from Frankenstein’s face.

Julius was doubly impressed. The weapon emanated from under the skin and must be lodged alongside the long bone.

‘One of the precious few advantages to Lazaran lack of feeling,’ Ada explained. ‘Muscles can be arranged to either fire or retract it.’

She admired the now tarnished blade against the light.

‘Pretty much immune to body searches!’ Ada paid tribute to someone’s workmanship. ‘Leastways, the frogs didn’t detect it, so I sawed through my restraints and beckoned a torturer close. Then…-’

‘… He came close,’ interrupted Foxglove, made bold by feeling the fairer sex shouldn’t swap murder-notes. ‘Suffice it to say, Milady dispatched him and came to my aid whereupon I…-’

His turn to be cut off in full flow.

‘Indeed, indeed,’ said Julius, waving aside the doubtless vile tale. ‘My imagination will supply all additional detail. Meanwhile, suffice it for me to say well done: hurrah! Also time runs short: will you join me?’

‘That was our intention,’ snapped Ada, ‘even if only to use this on you…’ Again she raised her armed-arm. Her point made, she then retracted the stiletto into its fleshy holster. Julius heard springs creaking and finally the click of a catch.

Yet Julius was not yet totally absolved. Nor trusted.

‘How come you keep company with Fouché?’ Ada quizzed him, her enhanced limb still poised.

‘Who?’

It took a tense second, but happily Lady Lovelace chose to believe the innocence and ignorance in his eyes. It took her two more seconds to blow

‘the Bureaucrat’s cover. Frankenstein could be left to judge for himself the significance of such a well-oiled weathervane working for Napoleon. There can never be two powers in any land, not for long; nor, as Scripture says ‘in sundry places,’ can one man serve two masters. The Convention’s own Minister for Police was showing in the most practical way possible who he thought would win.

‘So,’ Ada said, ‘it seems you haven’t betrayed us—not consciously at any rate. Perhaps we may walk together once again. For a while.’

Talk of treachery was a bit rich coming from her. Frankenstein could easily have brought up the scene at the aerodrome, for instance. But he was in a forgiving mood—and they were in a corridor in compromising circumstances…

‘Then, madam,’ he said, ‘by all means let us walk—and in haste. I have pressing business and this place will not lay undiscovered forever…’

Ada nodded agreement.

‘‘Tis true—but give me one further moment: there is something I must do…’

Before anyone could argue she rushed back into the room and did it. One of the dead interrogators on the floor got the benefit of Lady Lovelace’s pointed toecap in the face. Repeatedly. She grunted with the effort put into each savage kick. Frankenstein averted his eyes. Foxglove looked pained, as though it was he suffering under the blows.

When Ada returned she was smiling.

‘That one,’ she said, ‘I particularly disliked.’

In reality that was all, but for form’s sake she felt the need to add:

‘And he was very cruel to Foxglove…’

*** * ***

At the ‘secret door’ Frankenstein occupied himself with his Lazaran attendants, fussing and dressing their ranks till an inconvenient brace of servants had gone by. By that time ‘Team Frankenstein’ was augmented by Lady Lovelace and Foxglove, marching concealed in their midst. Ada needed no blending in, but Foxglove’s battered features and hands were whitened with wig powder Julius had brought along for that purpose.

Further forethought emerged from a knapsack one of the Revived soldiers was carrying. Out came a supply of small packets similar to that fed to the Lazaran earlier: though these were less well wrapped. Frankenstein bustled round to ensure each was swallowed as per his system.

‘Eat!’ he commanded, as before, and the slack jaws complied.

Then Frankenstein drew a deep breath, declining to look into the abyss yawning before him—and knocked on the door.

Nothing. Maybe. Or was that just the slightest sound of someone coming to the alert, someone keen that no one else should know of it?

‘Dr Frankenstein here,’ he said to the door. ‘Reporting with a fresh treadmill team. The old one’s for recycling.’

There: he’d spiced it up as much he dared, without overdoing things to the point of suspicion. It had the authority of his name, the prospect of novelty for a bored guard, plus a hint at grim fate for some present. Added together it ought to add up to persuasion.

And it did. The door opened. Behind stood one of the Old Guard; perhaps even the one he’d seen before, because the breed tended to a muchness. The man presented arms but, as scrutiny ticked off all the expected sights, degree by degree the firearm and its threat descended.

‘That’s news to me, monsieur,’ the man said warily.

The worse thing Julius could have done was try to justify himself. In the little-big world of Versailles, indeed in the wider world outside, Frankenstein’s kind was up there and the Guard’s sort down there. The man should regard it as completely normal not to kept informed.

So it proved. Frankenstein didn’t deign to answer but implied by every non-verbal sign the birth of impatience. He moved forward and the crucial moment for resistance passed. Julius and gang passed through the door and mobbed the stairwell.

Suspicion remained however—though that was probably just as natural to the guard as deference.

‘Shouldn’t the new lot be in lift-team uniform?’ he asked. ‘What they’ve got on belongs to shock-brigade grenadiers. Some staff-officers what come through here are picky about that kind of thing…’

The intelligence was flooding in now. So, this route was frequented by those powerful enough to be pedantic.

‘Perhaps so,’ replied Julius, anxious to spin things out. ‘I wasn’t informed. I can always get them to change clothes I suppose…’

The guard was sorry he'd spoke. Only those with very specialist tastes liked watching Lazarans disrobe. Particularly the 'jigsaw' jobs…

'Well…,' he prevaricated, calculating how long till he was off-duty and out of the frame. Meanwhile, as the man sought for suitable delaying words something else caught his eye. Alertness flared anew.

'Hang about: one of 'em's a woman!'

'Was a woman,' corrected Julius, clutching at straws now.

'Was, is; don't matter!'

'Oh, but it does,' said Julius, 'because…'

The guardsman waited politely for a while, but when the meat of the sentence failed to arrive…

'Because?' he prompted, the start of a growl in his throat.

'Because…,' said Frankenstein. 'Oh, deal with him, Foxglove, will you?'

He certainly would. The Englishman had suffered a lot from the French of late and was gagging to repay in full.

He put the guard down in one, with a rabbit punch from behind. A dishonourable blow perhaps, but powered by powerful emotions. The man tumbled like a factory chimney, unlikely ever to rise, and Julius deftly caught his musket lest it fall and fire.

Speaking of fire, the first primed Lazaran went off at that moment, rendering all this unpleasantness unnecessary. Not before time: indeed rather poor timing. If it had occurred only a few seconds earlier the guard would have had other things to do than ask impertinent questions. He might even have lived (though probably not for much longer, so there was no harm done).

The first-fed Lazaran foamed at the mouth, and then drummed his boots against the floor in a desperate dance. He looked at Frankenstein in mute appeal but that false mother-surrogate had no solace to give. Even if he'd wanted to.

Then the wrapping around the phosphorous must have finally decayed, releasing its load into the Lazaran's stomach. It presumably fizzed and burnt in places intolerant to such rough treatment, producing pain even the Revived could feel. In his anguish the poor re-tread human went berserk. Dull-eyes bulging he struck out.

His Lazaran comrades were nearest to hand and so it was they who were struck. And right from revival they'd been taught not to turn the other

cheek, but be again the warriors they once (mostly) were. So they struck back. An ugly—very ugly—melee developed that Lady Lovelace and Foxglove snuck out of.

Frankenstein handed Foxglove the late guardsman's musket.

'Save the shot, use the bayonet,' he suggested.

By Foxglove's easy handling of it you could tell the servant was no stranger to weaponry, but reservations remained.

'On who?' he queried.

'Doesn't matter,' replied Julius. 'We just want chaos.'

He proceeded to prove it by raising the bar to the lift-team's cage and throwing its door wide. They watched him in enforced silence for a few seconds and then shambled towards freedom.

Frankenstein let several through and then shot the next. Smoke from his 'pepperbox' clouded the scene and confused the issue.

The scene was not alone in confusion: Lady Lovelace was coolly reserving judgement from the margins, but Foxglove looked perplexed.

Meanwhile, the lift-team—first released and then shot—scaled several stages above mere perplexity. Yet there was remained the bedrock of their training. The warm-bloods did many inexplicable things but orders were still orders…

'Mill about,' commanded Frankenstein, as he twisted the chamber of his revolver to bring another cartridge online. 'Explore this place. Ascend the stairs.'

And, wonderfully obedient in the face of so much stress, many obeyed. Some chose one option, some another. Soon Frankenstein had the anarchy he wanted.

Then he added to it by shooting one of the Lazarans he'd brought with him. And again, and again, till it was dead-again.

'And you bayonet another,' he said to Foxglove.

Annoyingly the man looked to Lady Lovelace and only acted when she nodded approval.

A blade doesn't have the kinetic energy of a bullet, even when backed by a powerful physique, and so it cost Foxglove great effort to finish off his chosen victim and raise cell damage to critical. That and the fact that the creature resisted. Only fancy fencing enabling Foxglove to fend off its claws and avoid (additional) injuries.

There proved just no end to Frankenstein’s demands. As soon as one randomly selected Lazaran was down he pointed out another: the poisoned and berserk unfortunate. Maddened with pain it was currently wrecking the lift-cage, tearing off metal strips from its mechanism.

‘Now drive that one upstairs.’

This time Ada’s seconding wasn’t sought. Foxglove deftly jabbed and warded, step by step directing the thrashing dying-again Lazaran to the staircase.

It batted off the pricking blade, it sought to get to the shepherder behind, but then, driven by even stronger impulses, gave that up as a bad job and sought escape in the direction required.

Escape, of course, it found none, for its problems went with it, but there must have been some easement in pastures new, if only through novelty. A new scene to suffer in; a change as good as a rest. Up the stairs it went, two at a time, till lost to sight.

‘You lot!’ ordered Julius, singling out a batch of Lazarans; those he’d brought with him and those he’d liberated now hopelessly intermixed. He indicated aloft. ‘Up you go too: at the charge!’

The mournful faces consulted in silence and then went as bidden: to do precisely what they neither knew or cared. All that worrying about futurity was one facet of life gladly left in the grave.

From somewhere up the staircase came identifiably human cries. They sounded like warnings, raised an octave by alarm. There followed shots and the sound of dead weight tumbling down towards the listeners.

Of course, by then the general rough and tumble, and especially Frankenstein’s free way with firearms, had already raised the alert. From out in the corridor came the sadly familiar rumble of military boots heading in their direction.

‘Follow my lead,’ Julius said to his regained companions. ‘Understand? And stay close to me or you’ll picked off.’

What choice did they have? The full weight of the Imperial will was heading their way, or so it sounded. Faith in Frankenstein had to either be forced or faked.

Both Ada and Foxglove nodded and drew near.

A second later, the main door didn’t just open but burst off its hinges. Old Guard poured in, brandishing bayonets. Julius was speaking rapidly, taking charge even before the woodwork hit the ground.

‘A Lazaran mutiny!’ he said, in authoritative parade ground French. ‘Quick! Some have gone above!’

The first statement hit the bull’s-eye for obvious reasons—as intended. Bodies on the floor and powder fumes in the air seemed powerful confirmation. But surpassing that even, Frankenstein had tapped into a visceral fear. Undead insurrection was universal nightmare material. Aside from the intrinsic horrors, if established they took whole armies and years to smother. Some French colonial possessions in the Caribbean had never been returned to warm-blood control, and the fate of the colonists there could not be decently envisaged. All this was common knowledge that even foot-soldiers knew.

Frankenstein’s second statement also hit home, but for reasons not so clear. Those in charge of the charge to assist seemed dead against unauthorised access upstairs. Passionately so. Any infringement swept aside misgivings (or even suspicions) they might have about the lift-room scene.

That and Frankenstein’s fast talking of course. There was a split second when scepticism might have ruled and things turned ugly, but it passed. Waving arms plus high anxiety in Julius’ voice did the rest. The soldiers looked to him for guidance—and decided on a leap of faith towards this vaguely familiar face.

Time spent in Ada Lovelace’s company could convert anyone to shameless opportunism. Julius took both advantage and control.

‘Deal with these,’ he said, indicating the Lazarans still with them; making it sound more a proposal than order, lest it offend military propriety. ‘Then follow me to get the rest…’

For once everything fell just right. Specifically, a dead soldier fell from further up, down to the base of the stairs. His face was missing. As signs went, it was convincing corroboration. To garnish the dish more shooting and shouts descended from the same unseen conflict. That and horrible tearing noises: wood and metal and flesh were protesting—and in vain by the sound of it.

Then the balance of the Lazarans Frankenstein had fed came to fruition. Their phosphorous grenades went off inside and, to the outward eye, they behaved just like mad Lazaran mutineers might do.

What more evidence was required? Fiery writing in the sky? Some soldiers piled into the Lazarans and they, under attack within and without, fought back. The crowded room became a twisting, snarling, dogfight that

promised duration and high drama. Meanwhile, some Lazarans even fought their way out of the room into the corridor and Palace beyond. Dismay at the development sounded from there, followed by more musketry and war-cries. All in all, Frankenstein and friends were glad to get out of it. They headed for the stairs.

‘These two are with me!’ he said, physically clutching both Ada and Foxglove to him. That got funny looks but no contradiction. Somehow, the act of clasping them close made a shot or stab less likely: if only because it might harm him too.

They gained the stairs and rushed aloft, stepping over the faceless Frenchman and, soon after, a Lazaran peppered by pellets. Another flight after that there appeared a veritable barricade of dead and dying, entwined as they’d fallen; Lazaran and recently-live finally united in the same state.

Unconstrained by need to finish off the not-quite-gone, they started to pull away from Old Guard company. A further flight onwards and the trio were ‘alone’ when they met another clot of ex-combatants. Gingerly, they picked their way over the cooling or already chill barrier.

Even in such circumstances Ada had delusions of control.

‘Why are we going up?’ she snapped. ‘Surely we should get out!’

Julius barely had breath to spare but her command urges needed to be smothered.

‘Believe me, madam, upwards is onwards at present, I assure you!’

With barely a sour pulled face or pause in pace, she accepted and carried on. That Foxglove didn’t hesitate at all must have helped her decision.

His mind was on more practical matters. Foxglove stared at Julius’ revolver with transparent envy. It looked just the thing to protect his mistress with. Whereas all he currently had was a one-shot weapon, albeit tipped with cold steel.

‘May I enquire,’ gasped the servant as he ran, ‘where sir got that from?’

It seemed just too sordid, not to mention boring, to tell the truth and say ‘stolen from the armoury.’

‘From a dead man,’ Julius lied: although it was also sort of true. A low-grade Lazaran caretaker had been on duty there that night, making matters simple: Versailles’ arsenal was both abundant and free with its favours. An offshoot of its brute-force-solves-everything mentality perhaps.

Fortunately, Foxglove was conditioned into quietism. As with his country's economic arrangements, once inequality was explained to him by a cultured voice he meekly accepted things as they stood. Foxglove made do with his musket.

Judging by the number of dead and dying from both factions littering the stairs there must have been a sizeable contingent up top, able and willing to put up stout resistance. Frankenstein had been right in surmising he would never have got through under his own steam, no matter how golden-tongued and plausible his excuse. Short of using artillery it really had needed nothing less than a Lazaran revolt to clear the way. The minimum conservative effort to achieve his ends—which was quite a thought when you considered it.

But now that way was clear. At the very top of the stairs they found only dead men. At Julius' insistence, they waited for some Old Guard to catch up (as cover). Then all advanced.

The landing gave on to a guardroom. Those in it worried about nothing any more. Either their heads were off or their bodies full of lethal amounts of metal.

Beyond that there were (formerly) impressive double-doors—formerly because frenzied hands had wrenched them asunder. Now they hung drunkenly ajar; mute explanation of the carpentry sounds heard before.

The party passed through, stepping over strewn bodies and bits of bodies. Julius graciously let the Old Guard go first. It was, after all, possible that more visitors might not be welcome here; particularly after the last lot. A warm—as in fiery—reception might be waiting.

They stepped into peace and sunshine. A roof garden, or leastways an expanse of lawn, stood open to the air, surrounded by high walls. The glare temporarily blinded them until eyes adjusted and clarity returned. Even then the evidence of those eyes was hard to accept.

The fighting on the roof was over. Just a few Lazarans still flopped about in the last stages of phosphorous death.

Aside from that silence reigned. Which was strange considering that they stood before a field full of children. Or near-children.

PART THREE: LIFE MORE ABUNDANT

"I am come that they might have life: life more abundant." *John. Ch. 10, v. 10.*

A FESTIVAL
TO COMMEMORATE THE GLORIOUS
ANNIVERSARY
OF THE SECOND REVOLUTION
& FOUNDING OF THE PEOPLES' CONVENTION
SHALL BE HELD AT
MIDDAY, THE 23rd OF VENDÉMAIRE
IN EACH CITY DEPARTMENT, TOWN & VILLAGE OF ABOVE 100 CITIZENS. CITIZENS OF SMALLER VILLES SHALL MAKE THEIR WAY TO THE NEAREST EVENT.

ATTENDANCE IS OBLIGATORY.

PROOF OF PARTICIPATION IS OBLIGATORY.

GOOD CITIZENSHIP CERTIFICATES WILL BE PROVIDED BY REVOLUTIONARY MARSHALS.

CERTIFICATES MUST BE DISPLAYED ON ALL DWELLINGS FOR ONE WEEK SUBSEQUENT, UNDER PENALTY OF DEATH.

LONG LIVE THE SECOND REVOLUTION!

Chapter 1: STARING IN THE SISTINE

Lady Lovelace stood in the Sistine Chapel staring up. She was rapt: lost: she had been so for hours. Another of the limited blessings of Lazaran ‘life’ were necks that could no longer crick.

Frankenstein glimpsed a flash of gold through Ada’s upturned hair. Upgrading of her tinplate cap was just one of the nice-though-not-necessary projects she’d employed to kill time whilst stalking him in France. Twenty-four carat, apparently. She remained curiously half-brazen, half-embarrassed about it; sometimes blatantly going bonnet-less, as now, to tease the nosey.

Julius felt he might as well join the voyeurs and seek that sight out, for he’d had drunk his fill (and more) of high art within five minutes of arriving. There was only so much of ugly, muscular, saints and meaty madonnas a man could take without repulsion. Even Ada’s covert crown was a relief from them and their excessive antics.

Foxglove seemed of like mind and looked upon Lady Lovelace only. Between them her two Philistine friends were leaving Ada to it—what ever it was she was up to.

It had been her idea (cum command) to visit the Vatican in any case: an order characteristically unexplained. Julius humoured her in that and, soon art-exhausted, took the opportunity for a casual nose round his childhood home. From time to time he popped back to check there was no trouble but always found her exactly as before.

Which was a relief, just as much as it was puzzling why she was so entranced. There had been ‘trouble’ galore to begin with.

*** * ***

‘Unhand her!’

Said in colloquial Swiss-German, the command carried a lot of weight. The Swiss Guardsman swivelled round expecting to see one of his own officers.

Instead, it was Julius bearing down on him: a mere civilian and stranger—and an impudent one at that, never mind that he might be a fellow countryman.

They dressed in archaic uniforms designed by Michelangelo himself (so it was said) and some of them still carried halberds as their main armament, but no one doubted the Swiss Guards were soldiers in earnest. Most had long records of mercenary service behind them and now they'd come here to cap their career and redeem all the mere money-making by service to His Holiness. A service where the entrance exam was a vow to die for him if required.

Though their generosity stopped there. Laying down your life the once was love enough they thought: and so in battle many wore plate-sized medallions packed with gunpowder, ensuring that, if hit, they'd be beyond use by Revivalists and (profane) resurrection. True, the Church was dead-set against Revivalism anyway, but maybe in dire emergency…, under pressure… You couldn't trust anyone nowadays.

In fact, many soldiers in many armies did the same, but their assured destruction buttons had to be worn covertly, because forbidden. Their armies signed them up for 'Life-plus'…

Suffice it to say that the Swiss Guard viewed their watch over the Papacy with great (indeed, Swiss) seriousness. Therefore, orders shouted at them (by civilians!) in the august hush of the Vatican were not designed to endear.

The towering Guardsman said nothing and his face revealed even less, but he kept his grip on Lady Lovelace's shoulder. His colleagues round about tuned in to the potential incident and stood ready. Their intentions were crystal clear.

Even Foxglove understood. If only frowns had power the Guardsman's paw restraining his mistress would have burst into flames. But they hadn't, nor was Foxglove the force he once was; not since he lost his leg. In his diminished state the servant simply stood and awaited guidance. Ada merely glowered.

Julius gave thanks for English upbringings and their freezing effect on emotions. Otherwise, hatpins and crutches might have been wielded as weapons before he had time to arrive and take charge.

Though they still might. The Swiss Guardsman's hold on Ada was firm and he obviously felt no obligation to be polite. He conversed to

Frankenstein in their joint native tongue.

‘No walking-dead in here. It is not permitted. As should be well known. There are notices. Is she yours?’

Lady Lovelace had always kept her range of linguistic skills a mystery, but Julius suspected she knew more than she let on. He observed her stiffen.

‘Yes, she is,’ he said. ‘My apologies. I should have kept her on a leash.’

Ada’s lips thinned yet further, to vanishing point.

Frankenstein couldn’t afford such luxuries. His heartfelt but impertinent order to ‘unhand’ Ada must be draped in forgetfulness. Instead of affronted, he had to be all sunshine and light.

So the sun shone and light spread around

And in case that wasn’t visible, Julius melodramatically clapped a hand to his forehead.

‘I’m a dolt! I of all people should have known the ways of this place. I lived here as a boy, you see: whilst my father was in the Guard. Tell me, is Centurion Hauptmann still serving?’

Suddenly, things were different. Admittedly, the grip on Ada’s shoulder remained, but not so severely. She couldn’t bruise in any case, but it was the principle of the thing…

‘Hauptmann retired two years ago, back to Canton…’

The Guardsman paused—pointedly.

‘Canton Uri,’ said Julius, filling in the deliberate gap. ‘He had daughters there. Three daughters. All married now I expect.’

The guardsman actually smiled.

‘With children. Two of them serve with us.’

Julius was genuinely glad to hear it.

‘Carrying on the family line, of course,’ he said, smiling. ‘Like I should have done. Instead, I chose medicine instead of soldiering…’

They were getting on like a house on fire, and the Guardsman even proved to have a sense of humour. Residence in Europe’s soft south sometimes had that de-starching effect, even on the Swiss.

‘But still up to your arms in blood, eh?’ the man said. ‘If not in quite the same way…’

Julius thought about slapping his thigh in out of control hilarity; but decided that might be overdoing it.

‘Very good. Very droll. And I trust Hauptmann’s boys are a credit to his name? He was a fine fellow…’

The guardsman nodded.

‘A great man. He led the Guard’s charge at the Battle of Ravenna. A French ball took his left arm off.’

‘I think you’ll find it was his right arm, actually…,’ Julius corrected, skirting round the obvious trap.

‘So it was,’ ‘remembered’ the Guardsman: the test was passed. ‘You said your Father was here…’

‘Many years ago.’

‘What’s your name? I might have heard of it’

Indeed he might. In fact, Julius dared say (to himself) the probability was approaching certainty. But he absolutely could not admit to the family name here, even though Frankenstein senior had served His Holiness with distinction and honour. Since then, their surname had acquired evil associations, and nowhere more so than in this epicentre of dogmatic opposition to Revivalism.

‘Eberhardt,’ said Julius. ‘Julius Eberhardt. Papa was Marius.’

It was a real name, drawn from Julius’ childhood memories. A dapper little officer with a blonde moustache, as he recalled. A popular man. He’d made Julius a toy sword.

The Guardsman pondered.

‘No, I can’t place it,’ he said eventually. ‘Before my time…’

‘Long before…,’ Frankenstein/Eberhardt agreed.

The Guardsman shot back from memory lane to the present.

‘Even so, we cannot allow this cold-one to enter here. I’m sure you understand. Scripture prohibits their very existence.’

Julius showed by every sign that he couldn’t agree more: even whilst his words contradicted.

‘Yet she does exist, does she not?’ he said, trying to sound reasonable. ‘As does her husband, or ex-husband I should say; my servant here, maimed in the wars against the cursed French. I rescued his beloved when grave-robbers revived her. It was the least I could do after he took the bullet meant for me. Now she is his mainstay and sole support…’

The Guardsman surveyed Foxglove’s as yet amateurish balancing upon his crutches, and conceded some support might be indeed be necessary.

‘Well…,’ he wavered.

‘And you cannot expect me to carry a cripple around!’ said Julius.

‘No, I suppose not…’

The iron law of social etiquette precluded that. In emergency, a master might carry his inferior off a battlefield: but not further or after. It wouldn’t look right.

‘So I wondered,’ said Julius, ‘if… on this occasion? We have come a very long way…’

That was the unvarnished truth—and it seemed even longer. Pursuit, assassination attempts and amputations have that effect on a journey.

The Guardsman beckoned to a nearby nun. Teams of them stood at the Vatican’s main entrance to dole out coverings to those deemed improperly dressed—hussies with a visible ankle or glimpsed shoulder and the like.

‘Drape her head with a mantilla,’ said the Guardsman to Julius, making clear this was a big concession. ‘No, two mantillas. And another as a veil.’

Draped in the black lace head-dresses, Ada could pass for just another pale pious pilgrim lady.

‘In you go,’ said the Guardsman, ‘but don’t say you’ve seen me.’

Julius tapped his nose.

‘Rest assured,’ he replied. We’ve never met…’

It wasn’t far from the truth. Two steps beyond the portal Frankenstein had already forgotten him.

*** * ***

That was partly just Julius’ way with the ever changing tapestry of people that life showed him, but mostly it was because there were weightier things occupying his mind. Getting Lady Lovelace into the relative safety of the Vatican (!) was welcome light relief from the larger thoughts he was juggling.

Then she had been transfixed by the sights of the Sistine Chapel, and her trance or coma or whatever it was took her off Frankenstein’s hands for a while. Foxglove was around if need be, although only a shadow of his former self. His devotion to Lady Lovelace was undiminished by loss of a

limb for her sake. He could still lean against a wall and raise the alarm if need be.

Frankenstein smiled to himself. ‘If’? When was more like it on present form…

He entered ‘The Courtyard of the Penitents’: a huge expanse open to the sky; the architect’s conscious act to let sunlight counter the dark sins confessed there. Julius basked in the bright rays and—almost—relaxed.

It had been an eventful trip. The culmination, and quite probably the conclusion, of an eventful life all told.

All told? Phrasing it like that, and seeing the lines of confessionals along the walls, all in heavy use, Julius suddenly felt the impulse to tell it. To tell his tale! Why not?

Likewise, with the book stowed in the pack against his back. The book. What a liberation it would be to lighten himself of that!

The sudden temptation to disclosure was almost unbearable. His feet were taking him in that direction as if of their own volition. He surrendered to their supposed will. Complete nonsense, of course, but Julius wanted to be able to blame his boots.

He had been raised a Catholic and had always thought fondly of the Faith, if only for the childhood it sponsored, the ideals it sustained. Yet now, in sad adulthood, he looked in on it from without, like a man viewing stained glass from outside. There was pattern and form, to be sure, but the glorious colour others perceived was lost on him.

Belief had trickled away into the sand of life, drop by drop with every Lazaran raised and each sordid but necessary compromise. Julius told himself that was simply the way the world was. The Almighty had created that world and could hardly condemn the antics it forced His creatures into.

Yet the temptation remained: to plunge in and confess and come out cleansed! Frankenstein realised he had so many things to say and no one he could say them to. Not normally.

Fate saw fit to empty one confession box just as Julius crunched across the gravel beside it. A shriven sinner emerged. They looked… lighter.

Frankenstein hesitated—and then ducked into the vacated space as though it had always been his intention to.

Those waiting in line tut-tutted at his queue-jumping. Then they recalled that impatience was a sin not only on his part but theirs. So they compensated themselves with the thought that he wouldn’t be long.

They were wrong.

Chapter 2: TRUE CONFESSIONS

‘You took the child? You actually took it?’’

It was not that the grille between them impeded speech. Nor that the priest was hard of hearing. It was simply that he could not believe his ears.

‘She took it,’ Julius corrected him.

‘But you permitted it?’

Back in the shadows Frankenstein shook his head. Words were inadequate and failing him.

‘You have not met her, father. There is no question of ‘permitting.’ You do not permit a bolt of lightning. It either strikes or it does not, according to its own program.’

Dimly seen beyond the grille, the priest was mopping his brow with a polka-dotted handkerchief. The day which began so calm and ordinary had turned dramatic on him; the yellow light of just another morning now shot through with the red and purples of truly grave sins.

Granted, it made a change from the usual furtive fornications, the shoplifting and so on, that the faithful bothered him and God with; but this change was far from ‘as good as a rest.’ Here was the confession of a lifetime for him: both the lifetime of his vocation and the spilling forth of one man’s life lived on the stage of history. The priest knew he must strengthen every spiritual sinew to be equal to it.

‘Nevertheless,’ he persisted in reply, ‘that does not absolve you, my son. You have God-given free will with which to oppose this wicked women of whom you speak. Or at least to reprimand her so that the sin is hers alone…’

Frankenstein sighed.

‘I can only repeat, father, that you do not know her. You were not there…’

The phrase was fatal: before he could restrain his vaunted ‘free will’ Julius’ mind was revisiting the scene…

* * *

Children—or near-children… On a sunlit roof-garden.

They were Lazarans, but also more—as well as less. Naked, but also psuedo-clothed with flasks. Strings of flasks…

‘Can you speak?’ Ada asked the best of the infants, one she’d selected as nearest to human.

The boy regarded her with the coldest gaze Frankenstein had ever seen; something dredged up from oceanic depths with no soul to back or warm it at all.

The Old Guard had gladly departed to stamp out the ‘Lazaran rebellion’ elsewhere; and it suited them to believe Julius was the proper person to remain and restore order in this very improper place. So, Frankenstein and Foxglove were now the only living creatures there —and yet there was a crowd.

The white boy opened his eyes again and nodded: a concession to Lady Lovelace—but only conceded by whim.

‘I can speak,’ he said. His voice was more lifeless than his flesh. It had nothing child-like about it at all, but rather the expression an old, old, man —and not a nice one.

‘So why don’t you answer me?’ Lady Lovelace persisted.

Possibly because she was kindred to his condition, the boy humoured her.

‘Why should I? What gain can I expect?’

Ada looked around the roof-garden. Those amongst the milk-white children who could move of their own accord were shuffling nearer. There was little threat in that, but ample horror.

Perhaps she used the pause to count to ten to quell her temper, or perhaps she deemed this exchange so important she was considering her words extra-carefully. Either way, Ada re-engaged conversation without rancour.

‘It is considered polite for children to answer their elders when spoken to,’ she said maternally, as if addressing her own offspring (who she’d not so much as mentioned since leaving them). ‘It is what good children do…’

The boy was languid in his wheelchair. Lady Lovelace meant nothing to him and her guidance even less.

‘We are not good children,’ he said.

Nor healthy ones. He was the most vigorous they could see, but even that short exchange drained him. Not that brevity mattered. Those few

words settled the matter as far as he was concerned.

It was the icy arrogance Julius noted. Despite their many afflictions, each of the children remained coolly regal. Nor even a crazed Lazaran incursion had dented their supreme self-assurance.

The boy resumed the doze they'd found him in. They'd received their dismissal.

Some of his companions (or those with the requisite organs to do so) tittered. It was not pleasant amusement. The rattle of bottle-bandoleers festooned across every single body made it worse.

Frankenstein drew one such flask from its holster. Its owner raised no protest. Julius broached and sniffed it.

'Serum,' he announced; and sniffed again to be sure. 'My enhanced serum…'

Meanwhile, Ada looked like she was going to slap the princely youth back into discourse. Lost in disgust, Foxglove would have been too distracted to stop her.

But she did not. Instead she clenched her fists and surveyed the wider scene.

It was limited but rich in diversion. Screens blocked off all view of the countryside beyond—or more likely hid the rooftop's contents from the world outside. And with good reason.

Not one in ten of Napoleon's children had bred true. Some of the furthest from the norm were very wide of human. Most slept or writhed listlessly in confinement. All were that particular pallid white that comes from absence of vitality—and yet they still breathed. The likeness of their father was stamped on each of them.

'These are the best.' Frankenstein supplied expert commentary as the resident Revivalist. 'The ones that were kept…'

Foxglove spoke. Till then he'd been silent; revulsion carrying him somewhere far away.

'Then God preserve us from the rejects…,' he said, returning to harsh facts.

To which they could only say 'amen'—but neither did. It would not have been appropriate even if they believed. Here, high up in the sky and thus that bit closer to God's Heaven, was nevertheless a Godless place.

In any case, whatever 'preservation' they'd been favoured with was only a small mercy. With the whole rooftop garden their own to wander and

wonder in, they soon found that exploration revealed nothing any easier on the eye or soul. Quite the contrary. Things got worse the closer they looked.

‘How long have we got?’ asked Ada.

Frankenstein calculated.

‘Not long: there can be few Lazarans left for them to suppress down below. Five to ten minutes maybe. But by then a soldier will have mentioned they left someone aloft. ‘Left who?’ will come the question. ‘The Swiss corpse healer’ they’ll say. ‘You know: the doctor chappie…’ Two minutes more will pin a name on that description. Which will be reported and someone senior will realise I am not authorised to know the secret of the roof garden. And then…’

‘By then we’ll be gone,’ said Ada. ‘Meanwhile, let us learn all!’

Only Ada’s heart was in it. Therefore she led the way, sweeping a path, jungle-explorer style, through the undergrowth of monstrous children. Frankenstein followed, even though he didn’t much care to know more. Foxglove formed their rearguard as the infant throng closed up again behind them. Some of the chalk-white children pawed at the party as they went by.

There was a building at the furthest end: a long low barracks-type structure, out of sympathy with the elegance of the rest of the Palace. The brickwork looked hurried and slapdash. Frankenstein received a strong sense of foreboding from the place.

If she shared it Ada didn’t show it. Being charitable, Julius thought some laudable urge—perhaps the desire to see the worst and get it other with—kept her headed in that direction.

Against all better judgement Julius joined her, just in time to hear Lady Lovelace pronounce judgement. Her voice reverberated back from the threshold.

‘Oh my God!’

*** * ***

‘As you may guess,’ said Frankenstein, continuing his confession, ‘God had nothing to do with it. The diametric opposite in fact. Satan reigned there supreme.’

By his silence the priest signalled he agreed. Or maybe it was shock. Doubtless he’d heard a great deal in his time as a confessor, and perhaps it

was those things that had helped put snow on his head. Equally doubtless though, Frankenstein's revelations must have been a first. The highs (or was it lows?) of sin were being taken to hitherto inconceivable limits.

When reply came it was not in the priest's customary confessional whisper. Instead he husked.

'A scaffold?' The tone was that of sheer disbelief. 'A hangman?'

'A team of them. France's foremost professionals.'

'Beside a nuptial bed?'

'Well…,' Julius cavilled, ''nuptial' is overstating it, unless you subscribe to serial monogamy. Which,' he added speedily, 'you obviously don't, of course. 'An abode of Venus' might be more accurate. A jousting ring for bouts of passion: passion, I hasten to say, purely in pursuit of procreation. Though not, now that I think of it, 'pure,' nor indeed procreation as commonly understood…'

This wasn't the normal him. Julius was deliberately waxing lyrical to forestall remembering the scene in explicit detail. If he worked hard at constructing flowery descriptions of what they'd seen—and smelt and heard—on that rooftop, then perhaps it might dissuade his brain from visualisation.

The priest skipped over all that to make sure he'd heard right: in hope that he had not.

'Women in harnesses?' he went on, a litany that only increased his distress. 'Damaged women..?'

'A harem of them,' Julius confirmed. 'A breeding herd.'

It had been obvious from first glimpse: the lolling heads, the slack mouths: somehow sentience had been extracted from the pregnant mothers. At the time, the scene itself had been enough. Subsequent reading of 'The Book' and thereby learning the reasons for those sights improved the memory not one whit.

'But why?'

Julius could tell the priest didn't want to ask, but felt compelled—just as Julius was compelled to tell.

'Because what is asked of them,' he replied, 'or of their bodies, is so gross a demand on the human frame that the thinking mind rebels against it. Living flesh rises up against the carrying of Lazaran seed. Or so the scientists hypothesised. They observed that where the mother's higher mental functions were unimpaired there was a far higher spontaneous

miscarriage rate. Whereas idiots and the insane tended to breed true—or truer. Consequently, they experimented with the insertion of red hot wire into the forebrain and…'

'No! No more!' ordered the priest, leaning back from the grill. 'I forbid you. These are not your sins, they are the wickedness—the gross wickedness crying out to Heaven for vengeance—of others!'

Julius feared it might come to this: the time of trial. Here was the big question: was he an honest man or not?

Spiritual tests of strength do not conform to conventional time. This one, though a savage struggle, was won between one breath and another.

Frankenstein used the air that that breath drew in to commence his real confession.

'Well actually, father, that's not strictly true. Alas. You don't know my family name. Permit me to introduce myself…'

* * *

It was to the credit of the Church he served that the priest did not give up there and then—or just give up Frankenstein to the authorities. Instead, he steeled himself and heard the whole sorry tale.

Morning wore on. Outside in the Courtyard of the Penitents, the queue for this particular box had long since given up and joined other lines.

Chapter 3: MEET THE FAMILY

Back on the roof-garden, a few others heard Lady Lovelace's appeal to the Deity—but not as many as might do normally. Fortunately, His Imperial Highness had been distressed and fatigued by his last bout in the breeding house, and a day's respite was decreed. Therefore, there were comparatively few staff around when Frankenstein and friends entered in. Luckier still, several of the hangmen, midwives and other technicians lurking around knew Frankenstein by sight and so didn't renew the alarm.

All in all, the Lazaran incursion had been drama enough for one day, and compared to that Frankenstein's friendly face was normality itself. Especially given the horrible eventfulness of their day-to-day duties. They even overlooked his hangers-on and Ada's exclamation.

Julius waved a cheery greeting.

'Everything is well?' he enquired, as though it was his responsibility to find out.

Various affirmatives from around the building suggested it was, more or less.

'Just thought I'd check.'

Blithe confidence and high acting carried Julius through again. Several of the more cultured staff went so far as to thank him for his concern.

Others had other concerns. Foxglove's gaze took in the gallows, the dynamos and the suspended breeding racks—and found that actually, no, he couldn't take them in. And, apart from the sights, there was the smell. The place was scrubbed and sterile but it still stank. The place stank of sex and electricity.

'I have to go,' said Foxglove, gorge rising.

'We all have to go,' agreed Frankenstein, speaking low. 'As I said, our being here will be reported and not forgiven. But be so good as to give us a few more moments.'

'I'll try,' said Foxglove, and endeavoured to see no more.

'Stiff upper lip!' Lady Lovelace exhorted her servant: which was extreme compassion by her standards. 'Pull yourself together man!' had been her first framed response.

Sadly for Foxglove's resolve, at that moment one of the naked pregnant ladies saw fit to shift in her harness and loll her head in his direction. Inadvertently, he found himself face to face with her.

It was hardly a meeting of minds, not least because one of the minds had gone—and Foxglove even felt his slipping away. He was eye to eye with eyes that beheld nothing and lips the opposite of stiff.

On the contrary, she moaned and drooled. She must have been a pretty girl once, perhaps a maid drawn from the Palace staff, with notions of her own about how motherhood would be. Now she had no thoughts at all, not even about being naked and cocooned mid-air in row after row of many like her.

'No! Enough!' said Foxglove, and being a decent soul might have done something drastic at that point to rectify the great wrong before him.

Happily however, by then it was 'enough' in another sense. Enough time for the slow fuse Julius had lit as his last act before leaving his rooms, to reach its destination. Time for Julius' 'collection' to be unveiled to the world.

They could hardly ignore it. Home-made 'Hellburner' bombs were the weapon of choice for guerrilla movements worldwide when they wished for 'a spectacular.' Julius had familiarity with their effects in more than one continent, back when he was a mercenary (and thus should have known better…).

A few people had remarked on the in-preparation project, but it was by no means unknown for single men to have a beer barrel in their rooms (though rarely, it must be said, one so huge). Curious cleaners and Julius' few visitors were told it contained blood for his experiments, or that—being Swiss—he was a heavy beer drinker. Either way, they didn't enquire further.

Such squeamishness or national stereotyping meant he could go on with his painstaking accumulation, spending many an empty Versailles evening stealing the necessary powder flasks, bushels of nails and pots of tar. As it grew he gained faith that one way or another his hobby would serve as his default way out of Versailles.

Before escape-plans acquired a point and purpose, he'd envisaged being beside it when it went off, smiling sweetly in the faces of the soldiers come to arrest him. From him to the hissing fuse they'd look, and then back again, saucer-eyed and chasm-mouthed; too late to do anything but whisper 'oh no…'

Oh yes! A bang and a whimper: that would have worked. As might these revised plans, when all he wanted was to distract people whilst he resigned from Imperial service.

Quite aside from the explosive blast, Frankenstein felt a warm glow knowing casualties were thereby minimised. His rooms were far from the hub and only unlucky passers-by were at risk. This was a material issue. Knowing the staff as he did, it was clear many (most?) were candidates for Hell via his Hellburner. Better they should live longer and maybe repent. This way struck him as by far the kinder option. It was nice when things worked so neatly.

The signs looked good. Distraction abounded. Certainly, indifference and carrying on as before was no longer an option for anyone in Versailles. The whole Palace and surrounding countryside got to hear of Julius' ingenuity. In fact, it suddenly become priority one for all and no one could speak about anything else. Even Napoleon was shaken from his daydreams of world-domination, and the Old Guard stirred up like an ants' nest.

Only line of sight deprived those on the roof garden seeing a portion of the Palace pulse outward and then shroud itself in clouds of flame-shot black. However, given the sensational sound effects they could well visualise it. That and the floor heaving beneath their feet and a soon arriving shockwave breaking windows all about.

Frankenstein regained his balance and then his composure.

'You see?' he said to Foxglove, with a smile. 'I told you you need wait only a few more moments…'

He said it softly, lest outsiders should hear and connect him to events, but needn't have worried. Most were shocked into purely private thoughts and all were deafened. They looked from one to the other for guidance but found none.

Which is generally when the self-motivated can seize the moment and success. Frankenstein seized away.

Foxglove was temporarily hard of hearing like the rest but he got all the visual clues. The minute Frankenstein and Ada stepped doorwards he nipped in front of them and cleared the way. At last: a honest role he could play!

As the gunpowder furore died down a human one replaced it. Clamour rose from the unaffected portions of the Palace and lamentations from the devastated part.

It was perfect cover. Frankenstein issued urgent but contradictory orders to anyone en route inclined to stick their nose in. Foxglove's intimidating presence did the rest. Within a trice they'd crossed the roof garden to the stairs and made all haste to be away.

Nevertheless, before she left, Ada lingered long enough to take a book and baby.

* * *

'A bomb?' said the Vatican priest, shocked—and surprised he could still be shocked. 'A bomb set where innocent folk might be? How could you?'

Well, speaking of 'could,' Julius could have quibbled whether anyone in the Versailles set-up might be termed 'innocent'—but that was a bit too Ada-ish a stance for him. Instead, he pretended to misunderstand.

'How? he 'answered.' 'It is comparatively simple. My father first showed me how, and I arranged several in the course of my subsequent career. For instance, during the Fifth Basque War, we infiltrated a barracks in Bilbao and… well I digress, but suffice it to say the "Hellburner" is the poor man's artillery battery. Insurgent movements all over the world use them. The knack is, you see, to layer powder in a container—brandy barrels are good—together with inflammables and shrapnel.'

Guilty conscience was scrambling his mind again, hugging the inconsequential, and spewing out words like one of the new-fangled crank-driven machine guns.

'It takes time and patience but there is little actual complexity. Procuring sufficient slow-fuse was the only difficult thing, but as for combustibles, no problem! You would not be aware, father, but the armoury at Versailles was as free with its favours as a…'

Fortunately, 'Father' interrupted there.

'I do not need details of such devilry,' he said, with a firmness that would have stopped a train. 'They are no use to me—nor to you, man. Consider what you're here for! And why.'

'Sorry,' said Julius—which covered all aspects.

The priest bit his tongue. After so many enormities paraded before him what signified this further bit of moral deadness? It could be included in the

total without specific comment.

‘What then?’ he prompted, in vain hope the torrent of horrors had abated.

‘Well,’ said Julius, ‘‘midst the screaming confusion, the fires, the walking wounded and so on, we were able to simply stroll out. Quite remarkable! We feigned injury or shock or an air of command as the situation dictated, and the perimeter troops left us through. A mile or so on brought us to an inn where we hailed a cab.’

The audacity of it all, the sweet living from minute to minute, was a pleasant recollection. Julius smiled but fortunately the priest did not see.

‘Which was afterwards, of course,’ he added, once the sunlit inner image dimmed. ‘After Lady Lovelace had taken the child, I mean. Though I’m pretty sure I’ve already mentioned that. Don’t you remember? You were rather outraged, actually. Also, I said about the book laying beside the breeding program equipment. Technically speaking, I suppose stealing is always a sin so I’d better confess to liberating—well, stealing—the book too…’

‘Yes, tell me about the book,’ said the priest—and soon wished he hadn’t.

Chapter 4: TOP-SECRET TERMINOLGY

‘Classification ‘TOP SECRET,’ Copy 3 of 7.
Not to be removed from its appointed place.

PROJECT POSTERITY

Being a manual for senior staff and approved underlings attending his Imperial Majesty in the high matter of perpetuating his line.

NOTE AND AIDE MEMOIR!

Inconceivable as it may seem, the noble nature and vital patriotic import of Project Posterity is not universally perceived or shared. Vile reactionary elements even within our beloved nation, let alone the serried ranks of the enemy ranged against us, may be relied upon to condemn, perhaps even seek to thwart, this great undertaking and cause.

Therefore it is imperative that our work be shrouded in the deepest reticence, that the severest punishments be attached to any betrayal of the slightest whisper of our methods, our purpose and etc. etc.

Accordingly, caution in use of language shall be employed, even amongst ourselves. The following substitute terms have been approved for invariable everyday use in order to achieve the necessary habit of dissimulation.

His Imperial Majesty = *The Farmer*

The Palace complex = *The Farm*

The breeding area = *The sty*

Brood-wives (potential) = *Fields*

Brood-wives (serviced) = *Ploughed fields*

Brood-wives (impregnated) = *Sewn fields*

Brood-wives (pregnant) = *Growing crop* (followed by a numeric, 1-9, to indicate the month of gestation)

Offspring (live) = *Harvest*

Offspring (stillborn) = *Spoilt crop*

Offspring (non viable) = *Chaff*

Offspring (live + 1 day) = *Sheaves*

Offspring (live + 1 week) = *Harvest*

All offspring shall additionally be designated as ‘M’ (male), ‘F’ (female) or ‘N’ (indeterminate).

BE WARNED!

A number of former colleagues have perished in imaginative ways for breathing word of what should not be spoken of. And be aware that their last breath spoke of their agonies, and further believe that their death was neither quick nor easy! The traitors’ remains now rest unmarked, unhallowed, in the turds of the Lazarans to whom their carcasses were fed! The People’s Republic and the still more glorious Empire which shall follow will not remember them!

Yet though the penalties for transgression be terrible, so also are the rewards for virtue glittering. Friends! Frenchmen! We batter at the door barring the way into a life higher than human! We speak of ascension into eternal earthly glory! When successful we shall have seized the powers of creation from the withered hands of god!’

*** * ***

‘…Section 7. THE PROCREATIVE PROCESS

‘…after confirmation from the Cleanliness Inspection Supervisor that a sterile environment exists.

‘Then, if he is graciously willing, His Imperial Highness shall be assisted to ascend the scaffold and don the padded noose. The presiding scientist will have previously obtained consensus from both the designated hangmen (in separate interview) regarding the length of suspension and depth of drop before the

lever is thrown. Should consensus not be readily reached the serving shall be suspended and third and fourth opinions obtained.

‘In the event of concurrence the hangmen shall jointly throw the lever. To protect the Imperial dignity at this point all present but they, the presiding scientist and the help-maids waiting below shall avert their eyes from the spectacle, on pain of death.

‘The presiding scientist shall then proceed with all speed to below the gallows and supervise the serving. He will en route give the command for the firing of the dynamos and on arrival administer to His Imperial Majesty the galvanic enema.

‘Prior and during the suspension said help-maids shall ensure that the recipient field be positioned in its harness at the right distance and height to receive his Highness when the spontaneous erection and emission of seed consequent upon hanging occurs.

‘The captain of said help-maids shall also ensure by her efforts the proper mounting and full penetration of the field and manually assist same and also secure emission if required. She shall likewise at the appropriate moment give the command for the bearing-up team to take His Imperial Majesty’s weight. In conjunction with the captain of the help-maids the presiding scientist will at the same time bring in the medical team to revive and treat His Majesty.

‘The Commander of the Guard attending each serving of the fields will then assume custody of His Imperial Majesty from the moment of his revival and conducting from the sty and return to the farm.

‘A NOTE AND ADMONITION! Notwithstanding any or all of the strictures above, the Commander of the Guard attending each serving of the fields shall be exempt from the prohibitions detailed, and shall be free to intervene upon any deviation from duty he perceives. He shall have absolute authority to apply immediate condign punishment upon any deemed to have behaved with insufficient respect or to have exposed His Imperial Majesty to unnecessary risk.

‘The ploughed-field shall then be conducted to the appropriate area of the sty for monitoring by the captain of mid-wives over the following two menstrual months for signs of a successful serving. Any growing crop shall then await harvest under guard in…’

Chapter 5: SISTINE SOLUTIONS

‘Infamy!’ said the priest, loud enough to be heard beyond the confessional. ‘Satanic infamy!’

How could Frankenstein contradict him? What other response was there to this judgement on the book’s contents? From where Julius sat it seemed the priest’s review was spot on.

‘And the child!’ the tirade continued, born on by moral momentum. ‘The end product of such a loathsome process! An abomination! Your companion took it? And you permitted that?’

They’d been here before and Julius welcomed the repetition—maybe it meant he’d almost drained his recent life-story of sin. Perhaps absolution and a fresh start might follow in its trail.

‘She did,’ he replied concisely. ‘I did. And Lady Lovelace said…’

*** * ***

‘Evidence,’ said Lady Lovelace, in response to Frankenstein’s reproving look. ‘Evidence of what is going on here.’

Out on the roof and under the sun, she clutched the snatched baby to her breast. It lay there unmoved and unmoving.

Julius looked again, unable to believe it first time round. He’d never seen anyone in that situation look less maternal.

His face must have continued to express profound doubts. Surprisingly, Lady Lovelace brazenly conceded she’d lied.

‘Very well then,’ she said. ‘Call it insurance. ‘Your soft heart will guarantee it—and thus us—a supply of good serum.’

She had a point. The flask bandoleer which was the child’s only clothing, the huge butts of serum around the roof garden, were evidence of a hearty appetite; indeed, a monstrous dependence.

As if it heard and knew and agreed, the babe turned to look at Frankenstein.

Julius almost took a step back; he had to tighten his grip on the book lest it fall.

The eyes were those of an infant but they were windows into its soul—if applicable. The mind behind them looked older and wiser and colder than mankind.

* * *

‘No more,’ said the priest, admitting defeat. ‘Not today. It is… It is too much for me. I cannot.’

Frankenstein boggled. Somewhat like the priest, he’d never heard of such a thing!

‘What? No absolution?’ he protested.

From beyond the grill came authentic tones of panic.

‘Not now…,’ said the priest. ‘I… must seek advice. Come back tomorrow. In fact, I insist you come back tomorrow. Ask for Father Cornelius. At peril of your soul, ensure you find me again! But not today… Tomorrow!’

A wash of something spiritually chill swept through Frankenstein’s guts. Lest it pool and settle inside him he rose in haste.

‘Do not forget!’ urged Father Cornelius to the departing sinner. ‘Be sure not to forget!’

‘How could I?’ thought Julius, as he stepped back out into the sunshine. It seemed less intense than before: as did all the scents and colours. ‘Even Gilles de Rais, the infamous child murderer was shriven before they executed him—slowly. So what does that make me?’

Far more than the bad things he’d done or gone along with, Frankenstein now repented of his snap decision to confess. It had brought things to a head and coalesced the chaos of events into awful summary. If only he’d marched on by he could still have pleaded ignorance. Now he appreciated with greater force than ever just how much ignorance was bliss!

‘Damn!’ he cursed, causing people to stare. ‘Damn!’

Then, more softly but with no less conviction: ‘And damned.’

* * *

For all his lengthy absence, Frankenstein found Lady Lovelace still in the Sistine Chapel, still transported. Foxglove, leaning against a far wall, was still keeping patient watch.

Nor was he alone in that. Ada's prolonged meditation had attracted attention. Two Swiss Guards had her under scrutiny and were in conference with a priest. Passing tourists were pointing her out and the more frivolous elements giggling.

The likelihood of Hellfire, perhaps its inevitability, should have made Julius more, not less, reckless, but common sense is a tough yoke to chuck. The scene before him screamed 'time to go.'

He crossed straight to her.

'Come on.'

Ada did not respond. In his upset he shook her shoulder like no gentleman should.

That broke the trance—and had Foxglove been more mobile that might not have been the only thing broken. Yet there was less Lovelace resentment than Julius expected, and no hysterics at all!

'I almost had it…,' she told him—or possibly herself. 'Almost.'

'Had what?' asked Julius.

So it was to herself, because she didn't bother to explain.

'Don't worry, mein herr,' said Ada, acknowledging him for the first time. 'You didn't ruin things. It never was going to come; not if I lingered there till Doomsday. It was close but there's an element missing from the equation…'

Even so, she was pleased about something, to the point of smugness. Frankenstein sensed the balance of power between them had shifted in her favour (or even more in her favour). Not that he was worried about that. Julius didn't share Ada's insistence on one-upmanship as integral part of the game of life.

But speaking of life, and by implication its continuation…

It was easy to forget here, in this the oldest of human institutions, about trivial day to day things; like the fact that they were fugitives with an Emperor in pursuit of them. And that Julius might have just added another party to the pack in pursuit.

'We have to go,' he said. 'Now!'

Foxglove had hobbled up to join them. It added little to their safety quotient, though Ada fondly seemed to believe otherwise.

‘Why?’ she enquired. ‘They have not molested me after that initial impudence. Foxglove—and yourself, I suppose—could deal with them if they do.’

In his unshriven state Julius felt no need to mince his words.

‘You are an offence here. Simply by being. We’ve outstayed our limited welcome…’

Lady Lovelace had her shrewd look on. She smiled and studied Julius up and down, still capable of coquetry despite everything.

‘There’s more, isn’t there?’ she teased him. ‘What have you been up to?’

Earlier he’d compared himself (unfavourably) to a notorious child-killer. It recalled to him their present responsibilities.

‘We have an infant, of sorts, in our—no, your—custody. We should attend to it.’

Ada shook her head and smiled artfully again.

‘No. We pumped it full of serum sufficient for hours to come. And you’ve never been so concerned before…’

Another priest, then another, then two more Swiss Guards joined the mini conference by the entrance.

‘Madam…,’ reproved Foxglove, deploying maximum diplomacy against Ada-erism. She ignored him.

She was toying with Frankenstein, her girlish voice almost sing-song.

‘I won’t stir till you tell me…’

It was open to Julius to simply swivel on his heels and depart alone, leaving her to decide on the wisdom of following. Yet some power prevented him. Continuity perhaps—of which there’d been so little in his life. They’d come so far together…

Time for his second confession of the day: more than in the past decade put together

‘Tell me, Lady Lovelace,’ he asked, as arch as she, ‘do you believe in the sanctity of the confessional?’

It was a solid bet that she had been raised up steeped in every prejudice Protestant England had to offer. She came from the landed class which had done so well out of the despoiling of the monasteries and thus invented a history to justify it. Moreover, Ada had hinted before that her mother was a religious fanatic, aiming to atone for her brief marital madness with Byron…

So it proved. What's bred in the bone comes out in the meat: though as a sceptic in matters spiritual, Ada was more faired minded than most of her peers.

'In principle,' she replied. 'I've heard it said that the privacy of that sacrament is inviolate. One has never heard of it leaking secrets…'

Nevertheless, Julius' point had pierced. Instead of being triumphant she was now wary. Julius pressed home the advantage.

'Ah, but do you have faith in that?'

Evidently not. Enlightenment dawned. Ada screwed up her face in disgust.

'Oh, you haven't have you?' she said.

Frankenstein simply nodded.

'Everything?'

'Everything.'

Before he'd finished speaking Ada was on her way in a flurry of scarlet fabric and white limbs, leaving behind Parthian-shot curses with his name on them. Frankenstein followed regardless, and Foxglove limped after, trying to keep up.

The growing company of Swiss guards and priests did not hinder them. But they watched them go.

Chapter 6: PEEKING AT POSTERITY

‘Classification ‘TOP SECRET,’ Copy 3 of 7.
Not to be removed from its appointed place.

PROJECT POSTERITY

Being a manual for senior staff and approved underlings attending his Imperial Majesty in the high matter of perpetuating his line.

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Section 13. ‘Harvest Home’: 1 year +

…therefore it should be a source of wonderment that any survive the hazardous odyssey of conception to birth, let alone exposure to the world. Consider if you will the strong evidence that post-mortem seed is intrinsically carcinogenic (for proof of which ponder the precious few fields long-lived enough to take more than one impregnation), consider the feeble pulse of life (if such it truly be) that ebbs along the veins of our charges and what easy prey they fall to any ailment. If these things and the many other fatal snares are soberly considered by Project Posterity personnel they will come to the inevitable conclusion that our painfully few Harvests are jewels beyond price, and thus to be cherished and cosseted to the best of our abilities: yea, and beyond! Our successes may be pitifully few but the prize is correspondingly great!

From that low success rate comes our policy of keeping those runts and sports of Nature and less-than-true breeds which ordinarily might be mercifully allowed to slip away of their own accord. We strive officiously to keep all alive in the knowledge that perfect offspring have been exceeding rare. Therefore, true servants of the Emperor will not turn a cold eye or curled lip upon their charges’ disfigurements, deficiencies and gibberings. They are our reference library of past practice, our source of experimental material, and, sad to say, our reserve troops for the great hope we bear.

Accordingly then, patience and, above all, fortitude should and will be brought to bear on all the distressing aspects of our cause-cum-crusade. The

tedious dictates of ensuring sterile conditions in the sty, the sights, sounds and smells of the procreative process itself, the cruel necessity of applying red-hot wires to shrieking fields, the oft-times unbearable fruits emerging from their wombs (to name but a few aspects of the burden we bear) shall one day seem small price compared to the dynasty established and so unceasing centuries of glory for our beloved Motherland!

In the deplorable event that that does not suffice or content, the reader should consider what sufferings our soldiers endure in the cold or heat of a dozen different fronts, the risks they run, the painful deaths by myriad means they court. Those who harbour reservations should ask themselves: is not ours the incomparably better lot?

Any amongst us who cannot approach their work with a spring in their step and joy in their souls should reflect that the Russian front is always in need of fresh assistance. Such chilly natures may be ideally suited to the conditions they would find there…

But assuming zealous co-operation from all authorised to read thus far, we now turn to practical considerations.

Firstly serum. Like a faltering fire, the faint spark of semi-life his Imperial Highness has bestowed on his children requires constant feeding lest it expire. Therefore serum shall be constantly imbibed by all Harvest Homes according to the following prescriptions:

Birth to 1 month—three mini-flask bandoleers daily.

1 month to 3 months—one mini-flask hourly, on a constantly replenished bandoleer.

Three to four years. One ‘apostle’ bandoleer (13 full sized flasks) hourly.

*** * ***

OFF-FILE LOOSE MINUTE

Attach to page 179—effective from 18th Brumaire, Year 17 A.C. (A. D. 1837).

An enhanced serum formula has been developed by the recent Swiss recruit, Frankenstein (a direct descendent of the Father of Revivalism), based on a concept developed by his predecessor, the so-called ‘Egyptian’ (deceased). It has been shown to improve Revival functions in a range from

4 to 9%. Accordingly and henceforth, all Harvest Homes capable of ingesting solids shall be fed on such enhanced-serum marinated foodstuffs. Infants of tenderer digestion and those imperfect specimens incapable of independent feeding shall substitute liquor pressed from proportionate amounts of comestibles.

Adverse reactions of whatever kind shall be immediately reported to the duty officer who will…

… Also likewise, it is envisaged that said Frankenstein will be offered a placement with Project Posterity pending resolution of certain security concerns. However, in the interval it is imperative that no hint be given him of the Project's existence or his possible promotion to it. Posterity staff are therefore forbidden to dine, take exercise or engage in social intercourse with him or otherwise advertise their presence—on pain of a second degree disciplinary sanction, up to and including mutilation.

Secondly, sunshine. Although no amount of sun seems to brown our charges' milky skins, it is experimentally observed that maximising exposure to sunlight improves survival rate by 10% in early Harvest Homes. Hence the (at first sight) curious location of the sty high in the open air and exposed to Sol's beneficent rays.

Project Posterity's earliest productions were conducted in deepest and literally darkest secrecy, in cellars. The successes attending our labours were correspondingly dim. It was only the chance escape of a previously wasting infant, subsequently found to be much improved by an hours' liberty in the Palace gardens, which alerted us to this free gift from Nature. Indeed, such was the pleasure attending this discovery that the negligent nursemaid responsible was spared the guillotine and merely lost her right hand…

… but the beneficial effect diminishes in respect of older Harvest Homes and it is proposed that when the first crop reaches the age of reason to progressively dress them in garments appropriate to their Imperial rank and dignity. Some element and hours of nakedness will always be desirable, but at other times they will walk among men robed in suitable splendour…

… Strangely however, though the sun blesses them, its absence, and likewise any inclement weather, does our Harvests no harm. Project workers will observe them bear the lash of storm and bite of frost with entire thermal indifference. Some have speculated that this is related in a way not presently understood to their icy natures…

… for yes, newly recruited servants of the Project will in short order observe Harvest Homes commit what may seem to them gratuitous acts of cruelty, to captive animals, to Palace staff and even to each other. At the same times they will find that mundane concepts of ‘right’ and wrong’ are not so readily subscribed to by our precious charges. Likewise, their expressions of opinion on various subjects may appear excessively pragmatic and unrestrained by the reins of piety or ideals.

If so, then it is our perceptions that are at fault and no correction or even contradiction is to be applied, let alone admonition. There is wisdom in such an outlook not readily perceived by the uninstructed, and a streamlined morality not suited to the common herd. Therefore, intervention may only take place if the discretion of the sty or Project is threatened, if decorum is excessively outraged or if permanent injury portends to either the Emperor’s offspring or Project staff.

On all other occasions, it has been judged permissible to allow free rein to the urges and outlooks of the Harvests. The reason for this is as follows (Nb. on appointment staff shall study the following, memorise and repeat it to their line manager and formally state their entire agreement):

Project Posterity is not an end in itself, nor the mere itching of scientific curiosity. It is the trumpet blast announcing a new era in mankind’s story!

One day—and it shall not long be delayed (if we are crowned with continued success)—the products of Project Posterity shall be revealed to the world and step forth to take their rightful place in the scheme of things. The role of ministers, advisors and generals shall be theirs. Yea, in the fullness of time, the intention is that they shall make the Emperor’s rule immortal by bringing forth Harvest Homes of their own!

Therefore, facing such a glorious destiny, we judge that it is good and fitting that their personalities should be so very in accord with the way of the world. His Imperial Highness himself has commented that in the normal course of things it takes a lifetime of experience and many hard knocks to acquire the clarity of vision required to conduct an Empire. How good it is then, he has graciously gone on to say, that the fruit of his loins have sprung from the womb already well adapted to statecraft!

The Empire we aspire to shall not be easy on those who oppose it, nor will it ever be considered forgiving, or christian or kind. But it will see

things clearly and act accordingly, unrestrained by mere sentiment. Consequently, its dominion over mankind will not be short lived.

Be not deluded—instead be advised and rejoice: Project Posterity aims not just at Imperial progeny. It lifts its gaze even above a deathless Imperial line. Citizens, our aim is immortal Empire!

Chapter 7: JOY IN HEAVEN?

Given his recent history of ‘correspondence received,’ Frankenstein wished people wouldn’t write to him any more.

When their hotel room grew claustrophobic Julius had gone for a walk. To justify it he’d risked visiting the Swiss Embassy in Rome, to draw on funds and change money at non-robbery rates. There was a letter waiting for him. The functionary thought he was doing Frankenstein a favour in bringing man and message together. Far from it. He received not even a thank you, let alone a tip.

On the plus side, such as it was, Julius didn’t think they’d located him —not yet. Otherwise, they’d have made their views known in far more direct form: a stab in the dark, or maybe kidnapping for leisurely torture. But pending that decisive day ‘they’ must have distributed missives, shotgun-style, to anywhere and everywhere a fugitive Swiss citizen with a famous name might resort. Accordingly, for security’s sake the letter had to speak in very general terms, but to Julius its brief contents were clarity itself.

Recognising the source, he broke the seal and opened it in the street so that its ill-will should be diluted by sunlight and the passing throng. That plan was only partially successful.

Minister Fouché had abandoned the anonymity he maintained during their intercourse at Versailles. He addressed Julius as ‘*tu*’ and signed his sentiments by name.

‘Such a shame’ he wrote, characteristically weaving multiple layers of meaning from few words. ‘You stood to receive so many favours, to rise so high! And yet still might…’

It’s said even the Devil can quote scripture and so it proved. Joseph Fouché had been a priest before he was a Jacobin persecutor of the church; the Revolutionary commissioner who’d packed priests and nuns into barges and sunk them in Lyon harbour. Then he’d effortlessly shed that skin to become a pillar of stability and Empire.

‘Luke, 15, 7’ said the letter, which Julius’s sound Church education instantly expanded into: ‘I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in

Heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine persons, which need no repentance.'

Julius laughed at that, a merriment-free cynical explosion. Some of the passers-by looked at him; but not much or for long: Rome often attracted foreigners who talked to themselves.

'In Heaven, maybe' he mused aloud, conceding Fouché's point. 'But in the hell of Versailles? I don't think so…'

Julius was instantly proved right. The Emperor undid all his renegade Minister's silky cleverness by adding a scrawled, venomous p.s. of his own. Surely Fouché was unaware of the postscript or the letter would never have been sent. It must have been intercepted and… augmented.

The Emperor's only sacrifice to discretion was in continued use of code words.

'Wretch!' he wrote. 'If you reveal what you know, if you so much as breathe word of my farm, if you cause harm to my herd, then I will—'

Words must have failed him at that point, or else passion overwhelmed, for the pen had blotted and the nib actually pierced the paper, leaving a jagged rip. Julius had a sudden image, perhaps infused into the very substance of the letter by its author's emotional intensity, of himself receiving the same treatment.

There was more, till the exclamation marks ran out of page, leaving no space for a signature.

'So believe me you ungrateful and traitorous VILLAIN, if you DEFY me in this matter, if you DARE, then I will do such things to you (I have not thought of them yet but I shall!!) that they WILL be worse than your wildest nightmares!!!!!!!!!!'

It impacted less than it ought because Frankenstein had seen the Sack of Lille, and a great deal more besides. Which included the Emperor's 'farm.' Consequently, some of Julius' nightmares were very wild indeed

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Back at their hotel Lady Lovelace was shuffling paper and too absorbed to hear Frankenstein's news on his return, even if it involved threatening letters from Napoleon. In any case, she was 'not talking' to him since his confession confession. And that cold shoulder only commenced

after she'd extracted a promise from him not to return to 'that blurting box' as she called it. Before that he'd been entirely blanked by her, as if he'd ceased to be.

Frankenstein found such an undertaking easy to give. It was clear there was no point or hope for him in the sacrament. He was past saving and wouldn't go seeking reminders.

Right now and as usual, Foxglove served as Ada's amen-corner and representative on earth when she was absent. He had his wooden leg unstrapped beside him and was resting his stump up on a stool, massaging its sore end.

'Leave her be, sir, I should,' he said. 'Madam is engaged in important business.'

'And this isn't?' Julius waggled the letter back and forth, more amused than annoyed. 'Wild ravings against us from the greatest power in Europe, maybe even the world, and it's not important?'

'Not as important, sir,' said Foxglove. 'And if I may be permitted an observation; as I heard it read to me, the threats are against you, not us…'

Lady Lovelace didn't deign to look up from her occupation, but took time to silently signal that a good point had been made.

Frankenstein checked the script and saw it was so.

'True, very true,' he conceded. 'However, I suspect, Foxglove, that if Imperial vengeance catches up with us—or, as you correctly note, me—it will arrive as more of a bludgeon than a rapier. Indeed, I have every confidence it will err on the generous side and take in all manner of bit-players…'

Again, Ada indicated she was following the conversation and in agreement.

This was developing into a debate of rare intellectual honesty, for Foxglove accepted with a smile that Julius was right.

'Mebbe so, sir, but all things duly considered, when you look at matters in the round, what more can they do to us they haven't done already?'

He was looking at where his lower leg used to be, a zone that still troubled him with phantom itches and genuine sorrow.

That sacrifice had been demanded as soon as they sailed out of Trieste. When Julius despaired of repairing the sniper's work he demanded the limb as the inescapable price for Foxglove's survival. The case was too urgent to

await dry land and a steady operating table. The ship's surgeon concurred. However, even with that weight of professional advice, the ashen servant had looked to Ada for guidance.

She'd shrugged and said the decision was his alone. Julius didn't wait for it and picked up the savage-toothed amputation saw.

Lady Lovelace held Foxglove down throughout and succeeded unaided in that. In other circumstances maybe three or four burly matelots might have been required.

The leg was dumped overboard, in the way of such things, and the last anyone saw of it was as a floating speck caught up in the tide taking them all into Venice.

Then Ada had seen fit to quip that Foxglove would probably be the first of them to set foot in Italy. And wasn't it a pity he wouldn't be attached to it at the time?

If ever the bond of mistress-servant loyalty was going to snap Frankenstein assumed it would be then. But no, through his fever Foxglove mustered a smile. And perhaps distraction from the poor man's woes had been Ada's intention in saying such a crass thing. Perhaps.

The ambush in Trieste had been fitting culmination to their flight across the continent. They'd been harried all the way, constantly on the verge of capture and sensing the questing feelers of secret services night and day. The lavish bribes they paid out to buy co-operation and silence also attracted attention at the same time, and so depleted their wealth that they arrived at the Adriatic as near paupers. They even looked the part for, en route, they'd slept under hedges as often as in beds. Their faces bore the sleepless, haunted, look that comes from too many moonlight flits and bad meals taken on the move. They now jumped at every hoof-fall, expecting the arrival of cavalry.

Traversing a world at war meant there was no shortage of soldiery passing by to give them palpitations. In some parts they were likely to be French, in others not; but the borders between the two were in constant flux. And even where there was no military, in those few regions at fragile peace or too devastated to be worth occupying, the spies and agents of the Powers were present, looking out to buy and sell people.

Trieste had been the closest shave of all. Unbeknownst to them, though much suspected, they were under observation from their arrival. As Ada and Julius subsequently reconstructed it, reinforcements must have been

speeding there, probably complete with cages and implements-of-interrogation, to secure a live prize. However, when the fugitives made moves towards a ship all plans were off and their would-be captors acted with whatever came to hand.

A shot had rung out on the dockside. Foxglove slid to the ground, his face merely puzzled by withdrawal of support from a leg that till then had given a lifetime of loyal service. Simultaneously, from behind them came a cacophony of voices, some French, others fluent ‘international abuse,’ as men sped into the street heading in their direction.

So it came about that Frankenstein and co. took not the ship they’d intended to but the first to hand and ready to sail. Lady Lovelace dealt with ensuring its captain saw things their way whilst Julius got Foxglove below deck and examined the damage. Down there he heard Gallic curses beyond the hull but they stayed on the quayside, not drawing any nearer. Then as the ship got underway the external rage and menaces gradually receded into oblivion.

But it was a close run thing. Only a happy chance had directed their feet to an Austrian-flagged armed-merchantman. It had crew enough aboard to deter unwelcome visitors and a inbred inclination to refuse any French proposal, let alone threat. As such, it was their first stroke of luck in ages.

That it was going just along the coast to Venice initially seemed disappointing, but sober reflection turned the news into great good fortune. Those who’d waved farewell with obscene gestures from the dock would assume a longer voyage in prospect, probably far to the south, aiming to put maximum distance between chasers and chased.

Better still, the Venetian experience under Napoleonic occupation back when he rampaged round Europe the first time, hadn’t exactly warmed them to Revolutionary France or its successor ‘Convention.’ For did not the French snuff out the thousand year old ‘Serene Republic’ like it counted for nothing? Didn’t they then loot the place? True or not (true), that was how the present nostalgic Venetian regime saw things, and perception is all that matters in human affairs. The Doge and his Council famously felt very far from ‘serene’ about recent history and so, all other things being equal, would look with favour, or at least with a blind eye, on these fleeing France. It was even said some French royalists and anti-Revivalists, the most friendless and despised of all exiles, had found asylum there.

Julius and friends never discovered whether that was correct. It was enough—more than—that they found sanctuary. Sort of. Their brief stay in Venice was confined to damp cellars and movement by night. Even the medicine for Foxglove had to be fetched in covertly under cover of darkness. Of what remained of the City's fine art and architectural delights they saw nothing. And for some strange reason Lady Lovelace bitterly resented that. At loud length.

Then, when Foxglove's sweating-crisis was finally over and he looked likely to survive, the trio had set off for Rome. Increasingly of late, 'the Eternal City' had flared in Frankenstein's memory as a beckoning refuge, a place when French writ didn't run and their ideology was rejected. He knew Rome, he'd lived there as a child and (both clincher and sad truth, this) who else would have them? Where else could they go? The Falklands, perhaps, and its windswept, man-free, islands? Or fabled 'New Zealand'—and risk being eaten by tattooed savages? Anywhere else they would be known and face 'welcome.'

Or what about suicide, falling on their swords like heroes of old? That might thwart the Emperor and 'save' them. Death ruled a country they could not be fetched back from. Or leastways it did till Julius' great uncle spoilt things…

Julius held all such drastic options in reserve but for the moment settled for Rome.

He returned from reverie and thoughts of a lone English leg touring Venice's canals. What more could their enemies do to them, that limb's former owner had enquired? With the implied answer, 'not much.'

Such naivety! Julius knew better; as must Foxglove. The man had experienced torture in Versailles: he of all people should realise that experts could string out subtle suffering for years.

Such thoughts can travel through time to poison the future, and so shouldn't be fed or stared at. Doing either only makes them stronger, more virulent. Instead, Julius tried to count their blessings. They had life (except Ada), a full complement of limbs (except Foxglove…) and they were at liberty—albeit in hiding. There was a roof over their heads, a fire in their room and some money left in their wallets to buy basics like food…

'Food!' demanded the baby, presumably as mere coincidence. And it must be coincidence, because the alternative didn't bear thinking about.

Speech alone was bizarre enough in an infant barely old enough for solids. If telepathic powers were added as well…

The child stood up in its cot and repeated the imperious command.

‘Cattle: bring me food!’

It was a child’s voice, minus innocence or appeal. Instead it appalled.

Since Frankenstein was the nearest the infant plucked at his sleeve with unnerving strength—though any of the ‘cattle’ present would do. It called them all that without distinction.

Julius shied away, a natural reaction even in a hardened Revivalist. When Ada stole the child it had been normal enough, if paper white and spindly and not properly alive. Back then it cried when hungry and behaved much as other babies do. Now though, just a few weeks later, it spoke loud and clear of its needs. And its vocabulary expanded by the day even though none of them, neglectful foster-parents that they were, primed it with conversation. Now it daily sought to command them and called them ‘cattle.’ The rest of the time its eyes followed their every move in unearthly scrutiny.

‘Have you fed it?’ he asked Ada. ‘And dammit, woman; I detest calling a child ‘it.’ How many more times must I ask you to give… it a name?’

Again, Lady Lovelace didn’t even look up.

‘How many times?’ she echoed. ‘Possibly an infinite number of times. Which incidentally is an interesting concept to a mathematician such as myself. If only we could truly understand infinity then I believe the science of calculation would soar to wonderful new heights…’

‘Really.’ Julius used the ‘couldn’t care less’ variant.

‘Really.’ Ada volleyed back the ‘that’s right’ option. She was soaring, in full flight extra-merciless mode. ‘And if you’re so keen on christening the child why not do so yourself? I wager you’ve never baptised royalty before. Eh? Eh? You’d like that anecdote added to your life-tale, wouldn’t you? Admit it. Why not go the whole hog and name him after yourself!’

‘Julius Frankenstein-Bonaparte?’ mused Julius. It didn’t require much evaluation.

‘No, thank you.’

That was an insensitive thing to say in earshot of a child who, Julius suspected, could understand every word. On the other hand, its feelings were unlikely to be hurt. The ‘Book’ said they had none.

‘Well then,’ Ada pressed on, ‘if you’re stumped for something suitable, may I suggest ‘Insurance’? I told you that’s why it’s here, and I stand by it. ‘Prince Insurance Bonaparte’? How’s that? It’s got a ring to it: it does the job. What do you think, monster-child? Do you like it?’

She finally looked up at the cot-confined infant. It looked back at her and straightaway Lady Lovelace started to lose.

‘Food!’ it instructed. ‘Now!’

Ada gladly returned to her table full of papers, pretending her defeat was voluntary.

‘You’ve been fed,’ she replied, looking down. ‘Exactly as your precious book prescribes. More than, in fact. You dine on the same stuff as me but you don’t hear me whinging…’

All true enough, regarding her rations at least, if not about the moaning. Frankenstein had analysed the serum in the baby’s bandoleer and found it to be ‘just’ the enhanced formula he had brewed and earned his keep with at Versailles. Which proved something. There was no super-secret serum Napoleon used to vivify his seed. Given access to a supply of meat and standard serum Julius had found it relatively simple (if time consuming and thankless) to keep both Ada and baby fed. But not necessarily satisfied…

‘Food!’ said the child, with extra venom. ‘Immediately!’

That was a development: a new and grander word in its vocabulary, got from Heaven knew where. Up till then all demands for urgency were covered by ‘now!’

Inwardly, all the adults present shivered. Extrapolate that process but a little way and soon the child would be conducting conversations—and dominating them.

Mercifully, at present its ‘anger repertoire’ was limited to a glare that should have scorched Ada.

It was silly and superstitious but Julius didn’t care to cross the trajectory of that look. Instead, he went to Lady Lovelace a round-about way.

‘What exactly are you doing?’ he asked her. The constant moving across the table of scraps of paper with scrawls upon them had finally got the better of his curiosity. She often occupied herself with mathematical scribbling but this was more like a complex variant of chess of her own devising. Off would go one bit of paper to join another, only for Ada to

reject that pattern and try again. However, most of the montage she'd made was now fairly stable and only one section was still giving her trouble. She ummed and ahhed and muttered to herself over it.

No answer came to Julius' question. Lady Lovelace was engrossed again, maybe as a refuge from the terrifying child.

'Milady's been doing that since returning from the Sistine Chapel,' said Foxglove, to fill the embarrassing gap: ever the justifier of Ada's action or inaction. 'She said it's important…'

'Not to me she didn't,' replied Julius, and prompted her Ladyship to get his own, personalised, response.

'Madam…?'

Then he saw that one of the pieces of paper had his name on it. It was placed some way down the table and wasn't one of the still mobile slips. Above it was another labelled 'Foxglove,' and slightly above that was another christened 'the gondolier who hid us.' Julius felt even more slighted.

'Lady Lovelace!'

At last she admitted they shared the same Universe. That concession comprised holding up one hand to hush him.

With the other she slid a paper from middle ranking, slowly at first and hesitantly, but then with ever growing confidence. It was exalted to the top and overlaid on another.

It was held there a second or two, still tentative. Then Lady Lovelace squealed with joy. She pinned the twinned slips hard to the table with a jabbed finger.

'Yes!' she cried. 'Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes!'

Julius was a gentleman and Ada was a Lazaran but inappropriate images still occurred to him. He sternly banished them to his subconscious and deliberate death by neglect. The alternative and decent thing to do was identify her words as Lady Lovelace having a Eureka! moment.

Foxglove jumped in alarm. Even if Ada's educational programme had primed him with classical references, his first thoughts weren't going to be of Archimedes' famous exclamation. Action was more Foxglove's metier.

''Yes' milady?' he queried, in case she was in distress, and started to grapple his peg-leg on.

Distress? Quite the contrary. Ada rose like a rocket, knocking her chair over, energised and ecstatic. She still had those particular pieces of paper

transfixed to the table. Julius expected to see fingerprints pressed permanently into the wood.

‘Yes!’ she confirmed to her servant, eyes aglow. ‘Yes! It fits! It works! I think I…’ She could hardly find the words, her eyes wide with disbelief. She had to force herself to go on. ‘I think I understand!’

Only then did she release the papers. Made adhesive by static they briefly adhered to her fingers before flitting to the floor.

It was obvious they wasn’t going to get a sensible answer from her for some while. She struck Julius (who was not without experience in such matters) as almost orgasmic and accordingly best left well alone.

Instead, he went to collect the fallen slips.

On one were the words:

‘The British Secret Service’

And on the other, simply:

‘?’

Lady Lovelace was hurtling back to planet Earth now and near enough to acknowledge Frankenstein—if she had pressing need.

‘Who,’ she asked him, burning up with ‘need,’ ‘runs the British Secret Service?’

‘What?’ he countered, wrong-footed. It was hardly a topic he’d been expecting and, besides, he still hadn’t had the courtesy of an answer to his original question long ago.

‘Quickly!’ Ada urged him. ‘It’s vital!’

Frankenstein considered.

‘The British Secret Service? Well, its Director-General, so I’m told, is…’

‘No, idiot!’ said Ada, almost screeching. ‘Listen: I said this is vital. Vital! Who is in charge of-…’

‘Lady Lovelace!’ interrupted Frankenstein, who still hadn’t got the message, ‘I was attempting to tell you, if you would but listen. It is one Sir Percy Blakeney who has that honour. Nominally. In theory. Or so, as I said, one hears. And I’d be obliged, your ladyship, if you never ever again referred to me as an idio-…’

‘Then don’t act like one and I won’t need to!’ said Ada, still shouting. ‘Or a booby! Or a donkey! Will you damn well listen!’

Profanity from patrician lips! A patrician lady’s lips! Frankenstein gasped. Even Foxglove took an involuntary step back—and almost fell over

his false leg.

Ada didn't care. She stuck to her guns. 'Not 'nominally' she repeated. 'Nor 'in theory.' Who really?'

She was in earnest. Lady Lovelace was always in earnest, which sometimes made her wearying company. Today though, this was the real thing. Julius respected it and thought hard.

'I've heard stories,' he said finally, 'from people who might be in a position to know, that the real role is occupied by a foreigner. Or rather, a naturalised Briton…'

'Who is?' yelled Ada, urging him on with watermill motions of her hands. 'Who is?'

'Lord Vectis. Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Perigord.'

Ada subsided. She sighed with deep contentment. Her right hand rose and clenched into a fist, crushing something symbolic.

'I have him,' she crowed. 'And through him, I have my spark back! It arrived just now. Oh God, oh God, oh God! My beautiful spark!'

Her blasphemies aside, Frankenstein saw there might be cause for celebration. Ada certainly thought so, but he held back. Was it true? Could he take her word for it? And if true, what did it mean?

'You have…?' he said.

'I have.' Ada closed her eyes, suffused with pleasure. 'I have! It arrived just now, like a flood, an avalanche: but a delicious not deadly one. It leaps and cavorts within me now and can never depart.'

Maybe Swiss people should not linger too long in England. Cross pollination between the two cultures does not cultivate effervescence.

'Congratulations,' said Julius, deadpan.

'I almost had it in the Sistine Chapel,' Ada gushed on, oblivious. 'Contemplation of sublime art and tracing its spirit of inspiration nearly got me there. So near… I got the notion from contemplating other masterpieces on the way here; though with them I only received preliminary flashes…'

So that explained her spectacularly filthy mood when they were confined in Venice and Julius and Foxglove combined forces to veto her proposed cultural jaunts. Frankenstein had wondered about such sudden and uncharacteristic zeal for high art…

'Also, it required massive doses,' Ada babbled. 'Even the Sistine failed. I could feel my brain straining to burst through the final thin barrier and back to full humanity. But it could not. I think it never would, not that

way. Ultimately, the spirit of it is too personal to Michelangelo for me to borrow as a battering ram to sentience. Art can inspire but not save. However, I was on the trail: it gave me an idea. What art lacked was levels of complexity you could disassemble. Like finding one of Mr Babbage's 'Analytical Engines' for example, whole but unexplained. The mind of a genius such as I might discover its purpose and principles by probing the equal genius that built it. And it's same with a plan or conspiracy, or leastways a sufficiently subtle one. I mean, think of all that has happened to us! There was signs if we only would see. A hand has guided —no, flicked and prodded us—throughout…'

'Ah…,' said Julius. He recalled the Gospel verse perverted by Fouché. He felt Christian gladness that heathen Lady Lovelace had seen the light at last.

She read his expression and poured cold water over that bonfire of piety.

'No, Switzer: not your God creature. Do you never give up? You should have been a missionary, not a soldier. I refer to earthly genius. Someone who sculpts great art out of human lives. What a pattern! What a tapestry! And us as mere threads in it! The audacity of the man!'

That was quite a speech for her—and unprecedentedly positive. Her look simply challenged them to accept. Loyal Foxglove already had. There was a certain mad logic to it all that was in accord which what the world had showed them of late. However, stumbling blocks remained for Julius to stumble over.

He coughed politely.

'I'm afraid I don't quite underst—'

Ada was in such a good mood she forgave him his mental lead boots.

'Don't worry,' she said. 'You wouldn't. Only a mathematician—and a great one at that—could follow the elegance of his logic and reduce it to notation. Fortunately, I am such a mathematician. It is in my power to transform events into symbols in my notebook. Then, when I strived with them the event-equations surrendered their meaning to me and expanded like gorgeous blooms. After that it was just a matter of summarisation: manipulating slips of paper to see what led to who. And then I understood!'

She paused for breath (so to speak), or maybe to savour the moment.

'Oh, gentlemen: the shameless elegance of it! I cannot convey to you: words fail… Better than sex! Far better, in fact!'

‘Indeed,’ rumbled Frankenstein, disapproving. Foxglove blushed and looked away. Ada did not notice.

‘Gentlemen: the sheer subtlety! Subtlety I say! Grasping that slippery subtlety stretched and fired my mind. It enabled me to break through!’

They’d never heard her speak so fast or with such animation. Ada placed one hand to her heart, as if to calm a fluttering breast, or maybe pledge allegiance. She shook her smiling head in admiration and its ringlets seconded and accentuated the movement.

Then she closed her eyes again to enjoy private bliss.

‘I am whole. I have my spark. Thanks to him. The talent was all mine but some thanks must go to him!’

Frankenstein frowned and opened his mouth to speak.

She can only have sensed it because her eyes remained clasped.

‘As must we,’ she pre-empted Julius. ‘We must go to him! Now!’

Which gave Julius the opening he’d been searching for. Such lunacy was well worth a ‘but…’

‘But…’

He got no further. Ada opened her eyes and in beholding them Julius had to admit they were even more lustrous than before. The orbs shone and seduced exactly as they must have done in life.

She saw he had objections and would not be the instant assistance required. Fortunately, a ready alternative was at hand.

‘Foxglove!’

‘Milady?’

‘Get a hotel servant. Get me proper writing paper. Enquire the time of the next post collection for England.’

Things then happened in a flurry and in a way that was good; for activity at least stopped Frankenstein’s headache from worsening.

Foxglove rang the rope for a flunky and one came and went with Ada’s order. She pursued his retreating back with composite Anglo-Italian instructions along the lines of ‘make it snappy.’

‘Right, monsewer Talleyrand,’ said Lady Lovelace, positively crowing while she waited, ‘I’m going to write you a letter! And I shall say that I know your little game! And thank you for it too…’

Frankenstein might have had comments on the wisdom of that but he was distracted. Misgivings added incrementally up in his mind till they amounted to alarm.

He shook his head and Foxglove, who for all his alternative allegiance had respect for the man, noted it.

‘What’s the matter, sir?’

Julius crossed to one of the windows and looked out. Then to an adjoining one. Foxglove stumped over and joined him.

‘No,’ said Julius, pronouncing judgement on the view.

Foxglove looked again.

‘No what?’ he said.

‘This,’ answered Julius, and pointed below. ‘And as for that hotel porter…’

‘What about him?’

‘Have you seen him before?’

Foxglove considered.

‘No: but that signifies nothing. Places like this have many-…’

Frankenstein interrupted with complete confidence. Foxglove saw that his face was fixed and somehow thinner. The lips were compressed. He’d gone into military mode. Foxglove was impressed and willing to listen.

‘That flunky wasn’t flunky-like,’ said Julius quietly. ‘He hasn’t the bearing. Too erect. Normally he lifts muskets not luggage. And these people here…’

He indicated the random passers-by outside. They looked fine to Foxglove. Frankenstein didn’t agree.

‘They’re not civilians. They’re a street-scene from central casting…’

He knocked the window pane. He waved. He whistled. No one looked up.

Frankenstein whirled round and in an instant was beside his valise on the bed. He hurled things into it—after taking his pepperbox pistol out.

‘Pack!’ he ordered his companions. Lady Lovelace, still blissed-out, looked puzzled and then annoyed. She started to say something.

‘He’s right,’ said the pale child, pre-empting her. Ignored in all the excitement he’d been listening avidly throughout.

‘Shut up,’ Frankenstein told it and Ada. ‘We go!’

They weren’t going anywhere. The door came down.

Chapter 8: NO ONE EXEPCTS…

‘So it’s true!’ cried Lady Lovelace. ‘And all lies!’

She was acting like a saintly wife wronged by a sot—except it appeared no act. The eruption of Swiss Guardsmen into the room over splintered wood confirmed her every prejudice, the steady flow of black legend drip-fed into all Protestant Britons for centuries. Priestcraft, weapon of the Red Whore of Babylon who sat in Rome, no more respected the sanctity of the confessional than it did any other part of religion. Probably the Spanish Inquisition was on its way too, only delayed by the unwieldy bulk of its racks, red-hot irons and other torture gear. Plus grim nuns with whips.

If so they were much delayed. After the room was secured by soldiery, only two others entered, a brace of priests, one plainly more senior than the other.

Meanwhile there was nothing to be done. Frankenstein had already observed the street outside was well clamped down: he could reasonably presume the rest of their hotel were likewise. Similarly, they had zero prospect of fighting their way through the ample numbers of Swiss sent in. It was him, a cripple and a shouty woman (oh, and a kidnapped alien baby) versus an elite regiment. That would be so short a contest as to be no contest.

When he wanted to be, Julius was a sensible man. The way he saw things, his options now focused on the preservation of dignity.

Part of that included distancing himself from Ada. She was working herself up into quivering outrage.

‘You…,’ she spat at him, scornfully, ‘you… papist! You and your blabbing to priests! Just when I had…’

Then she noticed her present priestly company were paying great attention to her tirade, especially the last truncated phrase. She instantly shut up: which shed doubt on her foregoing fervour.

‘May I?’ asked Frankenstein in the ensuing hush. He indicated a nearby chair, all the while careful to avoid sudden movements. Half a dozen pistols held in steady hands were tracking him.

‘Please do,’ said the senior priest. He spoke in Italianate French, the aptly termed lingua Franca of civilised European discourse.

‘Thank you.’

Foxglove too slumped down. Only Lady Lovelace remained standing. With what she deluded herself were surreptitious movements Ada was stuffing her revelatory slips of paper into the placket-slits of her skirts. Perhaps she thought that celibate churchman automatically averted their eyes from the female form, or dare not contemplate a search of one.

‘You were saying, madam,’ prompted the younger priest, perhaps the secretary of the first. ‘Our arrival was inopportune because you had just…’

Ada sniffed distaste.

‘I forget…’

The younger priest seemed to accept that.

‘What a pity. It sounded most interesting…’

How she hated being humoured. Her long lost husband had done that.

‘You talk to them,’ she instructed Frankenstein, acting like nothing untoward had happened and their privacy remained intact. ‘They’re your lot: you attracted them. Ask them what they want.’

What she wanted was more time to conceal the paperwork. Yet Julius could see their guests were deliberately ignoring her skirt-stuffing activities. It made him feel like a child denying the obvious before adults.

‘What can we do for you, father,’ he enquired of the older man.

‘May I?’ The priest indicated a free seat. ‘It is your room, and we your guests, after all…’

If he was their nemesis he was a very courteous one. Which was nice. Julius always held that even if you had to kill someone there was no need to be brusque about it.

‘Certainly,’ he said.

‘Thank you.’

The slim, grizzled, prelate positioned the chair so that he could easily address them all. His assistant rushed to dust its seat before posterior met upholstery.

‘Don’t fuss, Simeon,’ he rebuked him, but in the most milk-and-water way. The younger man persisted regardless.

The older priest walked with a stick, an ebony cane topped with amber. Frankenstein’s keen eyesight perceived an insect, a fat fly by the looks of it, preserved forever within that yellow blob.

Before he spoke the priest regarded this decorative flourish, perhaps contemplating eternity to draw strength for the here and now. Then he rested chin and hands on the cane. Ever appraising, Julius noted a gaudy ring on one of those slim fingers. It seemed out of keeping with the man.

The priest glanced at each one of them in turn. It felt like an informed scrutiny, uncomfortably so: a look that bore weight. There was no indication, not the merest hint, what conclusions he drew.

Finally, the priest drew breath again.

‘You asked what you could do for me. That’s charming and polite. But given that I am an uninvited guest: a gate-crasher in fact, permit me to turn that around. What can I do for you?

‘Go?’ suggested Ada.

At last, Frankenstein had something to work on. He saw how the Swiss Guard stiffened at that. Which was revealing…

The priest smiled and shook his head.

‘Alas, I cannot oblige…’

‘Will not, you mean,’ Lady Lovelace corrected him.

He conceded it freely.

‘Indeed. Duty holds me here for the moment, however much you may find it objectionable. And I think the culture you come from finds me very objectionable. Therefore perhaps you’ll permit me to justify myself just a little in your eyes…’

‘Can I stop you?’ she asked. A genuine question.

‘No.’ An honest answer. ‘But you could refuse to listen. That would negate my good intentions…’

Ada considered herself a scientist, which implied an open mind and open ears.

‘No, go on, I’ll listen,’ she said, calm(ish) now.

‘Thank you. ‘Well, firstly may I disabuse you of one of your worse suspicions. And yours too perhaps…’ He’d turned to address Julius. ‘There has been no abuse of the confessional, no sacred secrets spilt. Father Cornelius, he who heard your confession, is unwell: most unwell. In fact, he had a seizure last night. Medical opinion is that he may be gathered to his eternal home before another night passes. Meanwhile… how can I put this with sufficient emphasis? He is most insistent that your repentance be recognised and absolution given. Even on the brink of the great abyss he is more concerned for your immortal soul than his own…’

‘A true priest,’ commented Julius.

‘Exactly. A credit to his kind: I should have promoted him while he was in health, but now it is too late. Meanwhile, all—and I assure, it is all—he has communicated to us is the supreme import of your case and the desirability that you return to the sacrament.’

‘Not much to go on then,’ said Frankenstein, recreating in his mind the pathway of events. ‘Just enough to bring you to this room but little more.’

The priest equivocated with a flicking motion of one hand.

‘Well…’

Julius jumped ahead.

‘Oh, I see…’

The priest smiled as if at a bright pupil.

‘Your father was here, was he not? You too, I believe’

‘That’s true.’

‘Then you know we are not entirely without resource…’

‘They have a diplomatic corps,’ Julius informed his two friends so they could keep up. ‘Which doubles up as a secret service. And an intelligence network reaching right the way to every last Church in Christendom. They’re very effective…’

‘Aha!’ said Ada, glad to have her misgivings stroked again. ‘More priestcraft! Jesuit trickery!’

The priest acknowledged both ‘compliments.’

‘If you like. Did not our Lord enjoin us ‘Be you cunning as serpents…’’

‘‘But gentle as doves,’’ Julius concluded for him. ‘‘Matthew 10, 12…’

‘Chapter 10, verse 16 actually,’ the priest corrected, ‘but broadly: bravo. I hope we conform to both injunctions. But to continue, what Father Cornelius could not supply, intelligence received could suggest. And that intelligence suggested the… stress he placed on your tale was not misplaced. A few enquiries later and here we all are…’

He leant back in his seat and smiled, as though that were it. But since neither he or his troops stirred plainly it was not.

‘And so…?’ asked Julius.

The priest fixed him with a very impressive gaze. It had the full weight of a two millennia old organisation behind it.

‘What you told Father Cornelius,’ said the priest, when the stare had fully sunk in, ‘I’d rather like you to tell me…’

* * *

Naturally, given his upbringing, Frankenstein had seen a pope before, but never actually spoken to one. And as for telling one your life history…

It helped when the priest was divested of his lowly disguise and stood revealed in papal purple as His Holiness Simon-Dismas II, Keeper of the Keys, Father of Christendom, Guardian of the Holy Places etc. etc. Then, with his white skullcap on and secretary dancing attendance, he looked far more the part.

Likewise, when a room was found and they had privacy, secrecy even, the situation felt slightly more natural. A thinned-out number of Swiss Guard stood round just out of whisper-earshot.

Even so, Julius hesitated till His Holiness pointed something out.

‘If I cannot absolve you,’ he said, not threatening but stating a simple fact, ‘then who on earth can?’

Frankenstein saw the truth of it and shrugged. He knelt and started off with the very first dead person he’d had brought back to life against its will and his own better judgement.

* * *

‘That letter you were writing and have now concealed,’ said the Pope to Lady Lovelace when he and Julius returned to the room (much) later, ‘I urge you to finish it. In fact I insist.’

Ada frowned at this further example of priestly cunning. It disconcerted her that they should even faintly imitate the omniscience of the Deity they served.

‘So you knew of that?’ she accused him. ‘Of my intentions? You were snooping like some insolent servant?’

‘Naturally,’ confirmed the Papal secretary, in order that his master need not admit fault. ‘There are discreet devices—slender listening tubes fed up the eaves, amongst other tools it might be wiser not to specify. We felt it was excusable in the circumstances.’

For someone who thought ‘necessity’ a total explanation for all behaviour Ada’s snort was somewhat hypocritical.

‘I see,’ she said. ‘Or rather, you heard. Well, if you’re so clever perhaps you can tell me what I was about to write?’

The Pope paused.

‘Possibly. But not via prophecy or any preternatural power: just informed speculation.’

He fixed Ada with a wise look.

‘Was it to be a very short letter? A mere one sentence missive maybe? Perhaps only two words? Such as ‘I understand’?’

Lady Lovelace’s shoulders twitched. Simon-Dismas smiled at the involuntary confirmation. It also proved to him she was Human again.

‘Talleyrand will like that,’ he said. ‘His is one of the best minds of his generation: probably the sharpest. And we trained him! What a tragedy we could not keep him…’

Ada de-discombobulated herself by force of will. She was pleased to be able to tarnish the enemy’s oh-so-cleverness…

‘You’re only part right,’ she said. ‘There was going to be more.’

‘Indeed?’ said His Holiness.

‘Indeed. Double the number of words you… guessed.’

Deep down, very deep down, Ada realised she was being petty, but the inner voice of conscience was too faint and long-neglected to make itself heard.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘I was also going to add: ‘I agree.’’

This was an important moment, too important to concede her even that little victory. To Ada’s chagrin the Pope approved.

‘Good. That makes our task easier. So, kindly write that letter and we will ensure it is delivered faster than you could ever contrive. Not only that, but we shall provide you with another message from our own hand and under our own seal. It will open all manner of doors.’

Ada might well be a dyed in the wool anti-papist but she worshipped at the altar of the effective. When her wants were involved, whether it be Mr Babbage or a Pope made no difference to her. She was converted to gratitude.

‘Thank you, er… reverend,’ she said, and let the merest bob stand in for a curtsey.

The Father of the Faithful was used to more. He held out the hand that bore the Papal ring for her to kiss.

Ada leant forward and shook the hand heartily. The Swiss Guards present stirred.

Julius stepped in.

‘We’re free to go?’ he asked. He was still distracted by thoughts of his penance. It would take years and ruin his knees. Best to start it somewhere not under close supervision.

‘You are,’ confirmed the Pontiff.

‘Tomorrow…,’ his secretary qualified that.

‘What? Oh yes,’ said Simon-Dismas. ‘There are things remaining before we say farewell. That, for instance.’

The be-ringed finger pointed out the book lying on Julius’ dresser. The book. Its plain cover little hinted at the sulphurous contents.

‘But we need that!’ protested Ada.

‘And you shall have it,’ the Pope reassured her. ‘But tonight our clerks shall labour to produce copies: many copies. For our own purposes…’

That seemed about all, but the secretary pointedly coughed to indicate otherwise. The Holy Father did not thank him for it. For an instant he looked pained.

‘There is one other thing you brought here,’ he said to them all. ‘We must deprive you of that too.’

He turned to the child in the cot. It was standing up holding onto the rails, naked save for serum flasks, calmly taking everything in.

The Pope took it in his arms, with compassion but firmness. The child lay still, staring straight into his face.

Simon-Dismas accepted that gaze. An old world and a potential new one regarded each other without expression.

‘Will that be returned too, like the book?’ asked Ada. She seemed a lot less committed to this bit of her belongings.

The Pope shook his head.

‘No. He is now our charge—and burden.’

Lady Lovelace smiled brightly.

‘As you wish.’

And out she flounced, without a backward glance, into tomorrow—which was where she lived and belonged.

Chapter 9: HELLO SAILOR!

The Swiss Guard had not left Rome since the days of ‘the fighting Pope,’ Julius II, three centuries before. However, you would never have guessed from the impressive show put on.

Out the Papal army issued from the gates in good order and glorious array, bright blue cross-key banners to the fore. The Swiss formed the core of the formation, in hollow square—with one particular Swiss, plus Ada and Foxglove, as their cosseted charges in its very centre.

Papal dragoons formed the flying buttresses of that mobile fortress, trotting along and reflecting sunlight off their cuirasses and Corinthian helmets. Light infantry, volunteers from every nation, surrounded all in skirmish formation, checking out the world they travelled through. Indeed, so vital was this mission considered that the garrison of Rome was left seriously depleted. If the French task force apparently on its way towards them, punching ruthlessly through friend, foe and neutral state alike, should care to turn aside it might well take the Eternal City at a bargain price.

Should they care to—which was unlikely. Every last scrap of intelligence pointed to unprecedented ‘mission focus.’ The French had taken mad risks and casualties, had adopted the quickest but costliest routes and sucked up crucial garrisons as replacement cannon-fodder en route. Likewise, the Compeigne Mausoleum and probably Versailles too had been co-opted. An unparalleled corps of scientists accompanied the force and fanned out from the army. They ransacked historic cemeteries and holy places hitherto considered sacrosanct as they went, regardless of international outrage, conscripting ‘New citizens’ on the move.

However, such concentration meant attention was diverted from other places. Its master designer distracted, the hitherto faultless tapestry of French success suddenly looked patchy in places. Its many enemies, old and new, such as the punch-drunk Austrian Empire, could hardly believe their luck. They and other lesser players plucked the tempting fruit such recklessness dangled before them. Cities were recaptured, whole provinces were regained and frontiers shifted to their pre-Promethean War patterns.

Similarly, their yoke being lightened, occupied places rose against French rule and drove out their mostly Lazaran garrisons. The Tyrol

declared itself free once more and harried its tormentors up into the alpine zones where the air was thin and snow permanent. Few ever came down again; only the Revived living on to haunt the living as black dots against the mountains, half glimpsed through blizzards.

And all because of certain configurations of electrical energy in the minds of three particular people which constituted memories they should not have or spread!

Energy cannot be destroyed, or so scientists were beginning to suspect, but other minds—and one in particular—were powerfully determined to do the next best thing. Those transient patterns of energy in those three heads needed to be transformed, changed in radical ways, and preferably liberated from smashed skulls into the ether before they could replicate themselves in the brains of others.

To that end, every string in the European puppet theatre was pulled, every stop on the Convention's pipe-organ played. All manner of hitherto unsuspected sleeper agents were mobilised to emerge blinking into the light of open action. Even one or two Princes of the Church; a cardinal here, an archbishop there, saddened His Holiness with counsel about 'caution' and 'periods for reflection…'

And in case treacherous timidity didn't do the trick, money recruited mercenaries and agents were armed in order to turn a straightforward traverse of the Italian peninsula into a meat-grinding, snarling dog-fight of a journey. Pre-existing banditti were reinforced by ideological supports of 'Modernity' and 'Progress.' Even the spirit of the 'Age of Enlightenment' and 'Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity' was exhumed from their graves to roust out a few professors and literati to the cause. Between them they were motivated to either carp at the Papal forces in the press or snipe at them with rifles as they pressed south.

A breadcrumb trail of corpses was left to mark that progress—but not those of the key trio for whom all this effort was expended. Swiss Guardsmen bearing up thick lead shields boxed them in night and day, minimising the danger of death or a suntan. Those shields were dented once or twice but not the bodies behind them.

Yet, Lord knows, it was difficult enough. Like wading through treacle, as Frankenstein put it, with diving boots on. Vital bridges were breached and roads blocked with barricades that had to be expensively stormed. Delaying landslides were provoked and nasty ambushes arranged. Even

mundane matters were made difficult and suborned villages sullenly refused supplies even when threatened with excommunication.

So, despite such promptings to speed and the urgency of their aims, progress was desperately slow. No matter how far ahead the Papal scouts pressed, just beyond their vigilance the way was always impeded.

All in all, the French effort was highly impressive. The same single-mindedness brought to bear on the war in general would have ended it years before. Europe might have been Gallic from the Atlantic to the Urals by now.

Yet sheer bloody-minded stubbornness can also get results in the end, though eyes must be averted from the bill. Finally, the square of soldiery came to the southern edge of the Papal States. There awaiting them was Britain's Royal Navy.

Napoleon said of his first, living, career, that he was thwarted by sea power. 'Everywhere I went,' he testified before dying on St Helena, 'on every puddle they could float a boat on, there I found the British Navy.'

Of course, they had to clean the quote up for publication. The original was replete with '*merde*'s and even less decorous words.

Not that he was bitter. When everything was falling about his ears, post-Waterloo, the Emperor had such a high opinion of his nautical foe that he flung himself on their mercy for fear of his former subjects. A British ship had borne Bonaparte away from all the unpleasantness without the slightest thought of hanging him from their yardarm. Unlike him, they believed in fair play.

Nevertheless, the issue still rankled and the point remained that they'd perpetually been the fly—no, the wasp—in his ointment, the disruptive former lover at his wedding feast. One of the few things that could stir anxiety in Napoleon's otherwise invincible self-confidence were thoughts of British masts looming on the horizon.

Had the Emperor been with Frankenstein and friends in person rather than just in spirit, he would have seen no cause for alarm. Even the ingenuity of the English didn't extend to moving their squadrons across dry land. There were no men o' war visible to give a tyrant collywobbles.

Yet he would have feared, indeed might have spewed his serum-dinner, had he known the awful truth. Frankenstein and co. were honoured indeed. Better than mere men o' war and worth the weight of myriad hundred-gun

first-raters, the spirit of the British Navy rather than its ships was there. Neo-Nelson had come to meet them.

Chapter 10: GETTING AHEAD

‘A-hem. Terrible tale,’ said the Admiral periodically as Frankenstein updated him. ‘Terrible!’

What with the close questioning Julius’ tale provoked, the telling took up most of their march to Naples. British seadogs had replaced the travelling Papal square and Frankenstein and Lady Lovelace rode in Nelson’s carriage at its centre, whilst Foxglove enjoyed the open air atop.

He had the best of it. ‘Terrible’ was both Nelson’s reaction to the recounting of their odyssey and also theirs to him. All that time buried in dank St Paul’s meant he reeked of the grave. Not only that but the Admiral was grumpy to the point of sourness. News of other people’s troubles only stirred him to fresh recollection of his own.

‘Talleyrand, eh? Terrible man. A sodomite, so they say. And a Frenchman. The two often go together. Mind you, can’t trust politicians of any breed. Take my case: you’re familiar with my final letter to the British people, the morning of Trafalgar?’

Frankenstein knew Ada was going to say ‘no,’ just for devilment. He covertly scraped her ankle with his heel to prevent it. Neo-Nelson required attentive hero-worship even more than the original.

‘Most certainly, sir,’ he replied for them both. ‘A famous document. You made but one modest request in return for all your services, namely that Lady Hamilton be considered your bequest to the nation and that they should see to her well-being.’

‘Precisely. And did they? I tell you most solemnly sir and madam, they did not! Instead, my dried up harpy of a wife led the mourning at m’funeral and poor Emma was left to starve. They wouldn’t even do that one little thing for me after I gave an eye and an arm and great victories to their cause…’

‘Disgraceful,’ commented Frankenstein—and not just to appease Nelson but because it was.

‘Terrible!’ the Admiral agreed. ‘Terrible. And then in seeking to live in the manner she merited my beloved was exposed to the insolence of creditors. She had to flee to Calais to escape them. There her end was one of grinding penury and neglect. Terrible! And yet they have the brass nerve

to then go and resurrect me and expect one to fight on as if nothing had happened! They have no shame!'

'Well, they don't, do they?' said Ada impatiently, as though an adult had come out with a childish statement. She fanned furiously away at the serum fumes wafting towards her till Nelson could hardly have mistook it. Frankenstein marvelled at her lack of empathy for someone in her own state who'd merely chanced to lie in the grave longer than she.

Still, Julius let it go. He been fearing she'd make reference to Lady Hamilton's later addiction to the bottle and conversion to Catholicism.

Nelson leant forward. Lady Lovelace recoiled.

'Let me tell you,' he said, 'in all confidence, they calculated wrong. Innocent Nelson gave all and asked for little but he got nothing—not even a new arm—said it'd 'spoil recognition'! Well, no more! Now Nelson fights for himself! He sees the world differently!'

Frankenstein had heard stories to that effect. A new Nelson had returned to Britain's service sure enough, but one less inspired by patriotism and with a pressing personal agenda. Rumour said his price for another Trafalgar was recovery of Emma's body from the French and then her revival. In vain the British Government protested the Convention had exhumed her corpse from Calais and had it under close custody. Nelson's unsympathetic response was 'well, sort it!.' Word was he'd give them a little while and then initiate negotiations with the French himself. And not only that, if they wanted the next battle to be another of his 'annihilation victories,' he was demanding a state wedding to Lady Hamilton, in Westminster Abbey, with all the Royal family there down to the last lapdog, and to hell with the Church of England's objections!

You could hardly blame him, but there were also other rumours. Grimmer stories. Even during life he'd gone strange under the influence of Naples when lingering there with Emma. The influence of its corrupt court seeped in and bad things happened: massacres, summary hangings. Now here he was back in that City and nominally soulless! The papers spoke of a 'dark Nelson' and darker-still deeds.

Maybe he could benefit from a spot of staring at the Sistine's roof or calculation of exactly whose plan he conformed to. Meanwhile, Frankenstein was careful. He smiled and looked Nelson straight in the eye. There was no light there, and less kindness. For relief and comparison Julius turned to Ada.

Then he looked again.

She was different! A gleam enlivened her vision. Frankenstein's stomach leapt. It had not been there before, he could have sworn it. Her eyes had always been beautiful but bore the standard Lazaran fish-gaze.

So did that mean… Was her returned 'spark' not only real but visible?

Gunfire, fortunately distant gunfire, disrupted conversation. Their coach jerked to a halt.

It was nothing unusual, for the sniping and hit and run raids on them had continued in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies exactly as they had in Papal realms; possibly more so. The difference was that the British forces were prouder—or more vindictive. They often went after the snipers, heading into the foothills to supply instruction and exact revenge. It made overall progress that much slower.

Nelson peered out of the window like a hound-dog scenting prey.

'Aha!' he said, not to them but purely to himself. 'Aha!'

The Admiral already had a sword about his waist but came back into the carriage to collect a brace of pistols (no mean feat for a one-armed man). Gripped in his lady-like hand they appeared monstrous.

In the vacated space Frankenstein took the opportunity to window gaze himself. Some distance off muzzle flashes sparkled from a farmhouse and surrounding undergrowth. A veteran of such events, Frankenstein knew better, but the faintness of the associated 'pop!' 'pop!' did make the unfolding incident seem remote, almost irrelevant to people on the road. Unless they chose to make it so.

Nelson so chose. In fact, so eager was he that Julius was almost shouldered out of the way. Though resurrected as an emaciated frame, Nelson now possessed Lazaran strength.

Ada sighed theatrically.

'Do you have to?' she asked the Admiral, wearily.

He was still a gentleman, whatever else he might have become. Nelson reversed back through the carriage door and perched on the seat opposite.

'No,' he snapped, after cursory consideration. 'I don't have to. In fact, I shouldn't. But I shall! Damn duty! I want to!'

Then irresistible urges carried him out of the carriage and he was gone, haring away weapons in hand and joy written all over his face.

'Come on lads! Last one to the enemy's a nancy!'

Ages passed. The convoy had to halt while the skirmish lasted and any non-combatants must amuse themselves meanwhile.

Ada got her notebook out almost immediately and was soon lost in the re-found ecstasy of computation.

It was not a country Julius had a visa for and so was left to his own devices. Those quickly palled.

‘Can you see what’s going on?’ he called up to Foxglove.

‘Distant strife,’ came the reply from above and outside. ‘Puffs of smoke. Dead on the ground. Nothing special.’

There was little in that to occupy Julius’ thoughts—and nothing at all to merit bringing Ada to a dead stop.

Her pen suddenly stilled.

‘Oh!’

Lady Lovelace shut her book. She set it aside, forgotten. Then she looked up at Frankenstein, almost reluctantly, through the medium of those newly enlivened eyes.

‘I…’

‘What?’ said Julius, alarmed.

‘I…’ she tried again but faltered.

Frankenstein did not associate her with hesitation. It must be bad.

‘Are you well, madam?’

The gaze was maintained—but not as her usual tussle of wills.

‘I am not… unwell.’

‘I’m delighted to hear it, but you seem—’

She interrupted him.

‘Sorry.’

‘I said I’m delighted to hear it but—’

‘I heard you the first time,’ snapped Ada. ‘I said I’m sorry.’

Yes, that was it! The inexplicable look! She seemed sorry—which was why Julius had struggled to identify her predicament. In the context of Lady Lovelace, regret was so far down the list of possibles as to be invisible.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘No, Julius, it is I who must beg your pardon. I’m sorry.’

It was his turn to have nothing to utter but ‘oh.’

‘I’m sorry,’ she pressed on. ‘It suddenly struck me. I have not been good to you. Or not as good as… I should. Or to Foxglove. Especially to Foxglove.’

Ada looked up to the presumed area where her servant's posterior might rest.

'I've been… I have been selfish. I've used you both. And that baby.'

Frankenstein gaped. Again words would not come. And Ada likewise —almost.

'Awakening conscience!' she said, equally to herself and him, utterly amazed. 'Do you think… Do you think that this means…'

But now they were well beyond even Frankenstein's range of experience and into terra incognito; vistas new.

'I couldn't say,' said Frankenstein at last. 'Maybe. But from what I hear tender conscience was not exactly your forte during life. In fact, the word is that it was a very small still voice indeed…'

Lady Lovelace freely admitted it with a nod.

'I could always ignore it. But now…'

She didn't dare say so but as a doctor Frankenstein was hardened to delivering stark judgements.

'Full humanity…?' he ventured.

Ada gingerly looked within—and flinched from a tender place. Her eyes widened.

'No,' she said, stunned, 'more than human…'

Frankenstein realised he stood on the edge of scientific immortality, as great if not more so that his great uncle Victor. Spontaneous Lazaran remission! The recovery by sheer force of will of all that had been lost with life! No: more than all!

And all his to report and claim as his own if he wanted. As long as the species lasted his name would be remembered. A heady temptation!

But in the course of his mad career across the continent in Ada's company Julius had changed too. Renown no longer blew so strongly upon his trumpet.

'Do you regret it?' he asked instead of all the obvious, dry, questions about how and why. 'Are you sorry you studied the Sistine?'

Lady Lovelace looked at him again and for the first time Julius could see a soul behind the eyes. Her flesh might still be cold but she was not.

Everything was changed accordingly: not just with her or in the confines of the carriage but world-wide. The implications exploded and spread out like his Versailles Hellburner.

'No,' Ada answered, shocking herself. 'No!'

‘Oh ho!’ said Nelson, returning at just the wrong moment and seizing with a death-grip the wrong end of the stick. ‘Turned you down has she, Frankenstein? Never mind. Lazaran flesh is like cold pork anyway—and I speak as one so I should know. Terrible! Be patient. Wait until you see the live ladies of Naples. Mmmmm!’

The Admiral smacked his blue lips.

‘De-licious! Every one of ‘em soft-palmed and full-bottomed to a man—if you get m’drift. And if you’re famous enough they’ll even go with a deader!’

There was a great spray of blood across his tunic—apparently not his own—and he bore a darkly wet sack. Dumped upon the seat whatever was within immediately began to seep out and stain.

With an abrupt movement that made his companions jump, the Admiral rammed his sword pommel against the carriage roof.

‘On,’ he bellowed to those above. ‘On to Naples! Take me to my ships!’

Soon there came the crack of whip and creak of harness, and off they set again.

‘Where were we?’ said Nelson, fidgeting to sit his thin frame comfortably. ‘Oh yes, you two. You three if you count the flunky up there…’

Again he thumped the carriage roof with his sword. Above them both Foxglove and the driver frowned in puzzlement—if they went any faster they’d leave the infantry behind. They reached a silent, tacit agreement between them that the noise hadn’t happened.

A pity, because Foxglove never enquired afterwards and learnt of his mistress’ ensuing vote of confidence. It would have swelled his loyal heart to bursting.

‘Oh, but I do count him,’ said Ada. ‘Never more so.’

‘Very commendable,’ said Nelson, who was known for his democratic impulses (when circumstances allowed). ‘Well, all of you then: *tria juncta in uno*. Three united as one.’

Frankenstein privately raised an eyebrow at Ada. They were flattered indeed. That was the Latin tag Nelson had coined to cover his curious *ménage* with Sir William and Emma Hamilton. Classical wrapping round a major social scandal of the day.

What did it matter now? All three of that torrid trio were dead (if not gone): all passion spent. Their little sins of the flesh were surely forgiven, because if not it suggested the Almighty was more merciless than man, His creation. Which was saying something…

‘The motto of the Order of the Bath, I believe,’ said Lady Lovelace.

‘What?’ said Nelson, recalled from reverie.

‘*Tria juncta in uno*, Admiral. ‘The motto of the Order of the Bath. Which you had the honour of owning, I believe.’

She could well believe it because Nelson actually wore its gaudy golden starburst on his breast along with a Christmas tree of other decorations. Although smeared with bandit blood it remained unmistakable.

‘S’right,’ said the Admiral. ‘Yes indeed.’

Frankenstein realised she’d spoken out of kindness. Ada had acted out of kindness! She’d wanted to spare the Admiral any embarrassment. Astounding!

‘The highest of honours,’ she added. ‘Dearly bought no doubt.’

England’s finest Revivalists might have been able to give Nelson back the semblance of life, but a new arm wasn’t included. Limbs lost pre-mortem couldn’t be regrown, and at the time it wasn’t thought politic to stitch another man’s arm on.

‘Very dearly…,’ Nelson agreed, and the residue of his lost right arm, his ‘flipper’ as he called it, stirred. But it was more likely he was thinking of all the bliss with Emma that duty had deprived him of.

Inspired by Ada, Julius joined in the mercy mission.

‘You were saying,’ he prompted, to get him back. ‘About the three of us…’

‘What? Oh yes: you three. Well, apparently you’re special. Very special…’

He appraised Julius and Ada head to toe.

‘For some reason… That’s why I came in person. To have a look. And because I felt like it, of course. It seemed a challenge to get you back alive, never mind orders. Half of Europe mobilised against you poor three. Nelson knows an underdog when he sees one. I recognised a job calling for my supreme talents. Plus a holiday: the opportunity to do a little hunting…’

He held up the dripping sack. Julius and Ada shrank back.

‘Horatia, my daughter, has a birthday coming up. So I’ve got her a present. I think it’s a parent’s duty to see their children get ahead, don’t

you? Get-a-head. Get it?'

Nelson's laugh was like dead trees creaking against each other in the wind.

'Terrible!' said Ada—and meant it. Fortunately, she was either unheard or ignored.

'Anyhow,' Nelson continued, dropping the trophy bag to foul a different bit of upholstery, 'me being here, me saving you, has nothing to do with monsewer Talleyrand's command! Neo-Nelson doesn't dance to his tune! Quite the opposite in fact. He's a Frenchman. 'You should hate a Frenchman as you would the Devil': that's what I always told my new midshipmen. Because that's what my mother taught me…'

He'd lost her early: a life-time—and afterlife-time—ago now. Thought of the loss made the Admiral raise his remaining arm to wipe away a manly tear. Except that Lazarans were unable to weep.

'Would have said no in usual circumstances…'

His expression had changed and hardened. They got to see the face of 'Dark Nelson.'

'No, in normal circumstances he—and you —could bloody well go hang…'

Frankenstein overlooked that. Nelson wasn't himself—and never would be again.

''Normal circumstances'?' he enquired.

'S'right. Proves what rot all this 'Dark Nelson' nonsense is. I still have a soft heart, more fool me…'

Then he realised he'd lost them and kindly backtracked.

'You don't know? About Talleyrand? I assumed you would. The Hell-bound old scoundrel is dying.'

Chapter 11: WHEN FELLATIO FAILS

‘02/02/1837: Eighty-three years gone by! I do not know that I am satisfied when I consider how so many years have passed, how I have filled them. What useless agitations, what fruitless endeavours! Tiresome complications, exaggerated emotions, spent efforts, wasted gifts, hatreds aroused, sense of proportion lost, illusions destroyed, tastes exhausted! What result in the end? Mortal and physical weariness, complete discouragement and profound disgust with the past. There are a crowd of people who have the gift or the drawback of never properly understanding themselves. I possess only too much the opposite disadvantage or superiority; it increases with the gravity of old age.’

Insomnia and early hours ennui are not conducive to cheerful journal writing. Talleyrand set down his pen, fatigued by so much intense integrity but still not sleepy. He re-read what he had written and sighed.

Unbeknownst to each other, two trusted retainers had been separately tasked with the destruction of his journal immediately after his death. Meanwhile, within its pages at least, he could be honest with himself.

Yet an act maintained for so long becomes reality. Since gaining the age of reason Talleyrand had cultivated a butterfly spirit, flitting lightly over humanity, laughing at himself and it. That stance now reasserted itself, soaring above so much dull-dog earnestness. He was glad the journal would one day be committed to the flames and thus rid the world of all its cant.

Meanwhile, he knew of some sovereign remedies for spiritual slumps.

Talleyrand reached for the bellrope and rang for champagne! And a strumpet!

*** * ***

When even champagne and fellatio failed Talleyrand he knew he was dying. Or should die: which amounted to the same thing.

He set his barely sipped glass aside. Treacherous taste-buds made it taste acid.

‘Thank you, my dear,’ he said to the shape under the covers. ‘But that will be all.’

When she emerged blinking, the lovely Loseley milkmaid was worried she was in trouble. The Prince went to great pains to reassure her.

‘The fault is all mine,’ he said, feigning the sweetest of smiles. ‘You are entirely exquisite but I am old and failing. My time is done and therefore so is yours. Thank you for all the delectable awakenings. Thank your brother too. Now you should be on your way: morning milking awaits to judge by all the mooing from outside. Be sure to tell my chamberlain I said you should have an extra shilling today.’

Which contented her, if not him, and she left, closing the bedroom door and a whole colourful chapter of his life.

It was indeed early, an uncivilised hour, when he’d summoned her, preceding even her main (respectable) duties of the day. Talleyrand was sleeping worse and worse of late, and some nights were interminable.

In fact, the more he thought of it and faced the cold facts, all manner of things were closing in on him now, all manner of minor aches and pains adding up to something significant.

And now this culminating failure. Talleyrand had been many—indeed, most—things in his long life, but never impotent, not in any sense. That was the final straw. Or a straw in the wind, to continue the metaphor. Or the —limp—straw that broke the camel’s back.

It had been a broad back in its time, a strong one as well that had borne up many things, many burdens, for all his outward appearance of a foppish cripple. Now its work was done. Time to rest. Time to go.

Talleyrand released a long breath and switched off. Off! The mighty survival mechanism, the gleaming machine that had powered him so long, faltered for the first time in nine decades.

Momentum carried it on a few seconds more but then the great betrayal sunk in. It failed, it coughed and finally slid to a halt.

Rising for want of anything better to do in bed, Talleyrand crossed to where his schemes were made manifest. On a tabletop inlaid with a mosaic map of Europe, exquisite porcelain figurines represented anything from armies to individuals playing out their hour upon the stage. For a goodly proportion, knowingly or not, Talleyrand was both their stage manager and acting coach.

When not in use this dolls'-house for statesmen was kept decently shrouded in black velvet. The Prince lifted this cover and studied the work of his hands—and mind and money and cunning and appalling cynicism. Curiously enough, certain patterns therein exactly matched Lady Lovelace's paper construct in her Roman hotel room. Not that either party would ever know of this conclusive proof that great minds think alike.

Talleyrand picked up a tiny Napoleon from the dot labelled 'Versailles' and brought him to eye level.

He smiled.

''Shit in a silk stocking' was I?' he proxy-enquired of a thing unable to answer back. 'Well, who knows? Maybe you were right. Politics is determined as much in the sewer as in the salon…'

In a petty but satisfying act of settlement, Talleyrand rolled the figurine between two fingers, hoping by sympathetic magic to make the Emperor dizzy.

'And how about a fitting alliterative description for you, *mon petit Empereur?* Eh? "Butcher in boots", maybe. Or perhaps "tyrant in tights". How do they fit? Eh? Eh?'

Nearby on the map, occupying the marker for Paris, sat a group figurine representing the ever changing cast of the Convention. Regular rapid ascents and Icarus-like falls to the overworked guillotine meant it wasn't practical to personalise the models.

Talleyrand picked this up too and engaged it in fierce combat with the Napoleon figure, also supplying a soundtrack for their struggle for supreme power.

'Grrr! *Merde!* Grrr grrr! Arrgh!'

In Talleyrand's not particularly humble opinion they'd be fighting for real before long, and he knew who his money was on to prevail. Bonaparte versus a gaggle of sleazy lawyers? (an oxymoron, he knew). No contest!

He knew it but also knew he would not be around to see it. Not after turning off his engine of ambition. Already he felt his attachment to the world weakening. Even the appeal of seeing his country's true enemies knock lumps off each other was not what it would have been yesterday.

Therefore leave them to it: clambering over each other, sans dignity, sans perspective, like slugs in a beer glass. And all for prizes hardly worth having! He wished them joy of it, safe in the knowledge they would have

none. Only antediluvian relics like himself retained any memory of the real art of living.

He'd said it oft-times before, causing young people's eyes to glaze over. Nobody could appreciate life who had not lived before 1789. The Revolution had swept in the modern age and even Talleyrand's far-sight could not see any end to it. All the more reason then to be gone and make way for a desensitised replacement.

Talleyrand dropped both figurines into the rubbish basket, planning to sweep the rest in to join them. A cleaner could be first to find tangible sign of one of the great players of the age quitting the scene, leaving the board bare and lifeless. And would be blessed by understanding nothing.

Then second thoughts struck.

It occurred to him that the children of the Loseley estate might love to have these brightly painted objects to play with. Just ditching them was a waste: of both the skill employed in their making, and waste of opportunity. Distributed to appreciative boys and girls they might increase the sum of human happiness. Heaven knew it could do with adding to. Back when he was a priest one of the few things Talleyrand had truly believed was that on the Day of Judgement God would be stern about any aborting of chances for joy.

Furthermore, in contemplating the figures' final seconds his eye caught those representing his deep plan. Here at the end of things he belatedly wondered what had become of them and it.

He had fathered this particular pet project and taken better care of it than any of his other offspring. He'd raised it and seen it out into the world with every blessing he could deploy. Now in adult form it was independent of him but it was only natural that a parent should worry. What would become of it? Could he still help?

The miniature Frankenstein, Lady Lovelace and Foxglove had been placed in an indeterminate location. Last heard of bolting from Versailles, leaving uproar and outrage behind, even Talleyrand's antennae had picked up only hints since. Reports subsequently trickled in but they could not be all true, not unless his protégés had developed powers of bi-location. That was the penalty of having overlapping agencies engaged in a hunt. Their paid informants boosted income by providing the intelligence people wanted to hear.

However, for good or ill it was out of his hands now. Either the plan had acquired life of its own or it was a Lazaran, devoid of any animating soul. Come what may, it must do without him.

Talleyrand found a jewel box and one by one retrieved the toy kings and emperors and armies and traitors and catalysts, placing them on their backs on the velvet plush inside. Like him, their careers over, they looked much more relaxed now.

Frankenstein and friends he left until last, before rescuing them from unspecified middle-Europe.

‘And where are you tonight, my dear grave-robber?’ Talleyrand enquired. ‘And your cold-blood companion too? I wonder…’

Despite everything, he had to smile. He’d chosen right with these little bundles of energy. Like ball-lightning. Very dangerous energy…

A Hellburner in Versailles, eh? The Emperor wouldn’t have been amused by that. No matter how high he’d risen the tubby little Corsican was conscious of his humble origins. Being housed in a palace, indeed, the palace of palaces, must be a daily scratching of all sorts of itches. Yet now his new home must look rather scorched and bargain basement.

‘Naughty, naughty!’ Talleyrand reproved the Frankenstein figure, waggling a finger at it.

A scratch at the boudoir door. A trusted secretarial face edged round it when the Prince sighed ‘enter.’

‘It’s Sir Percy Blakeney to see you, excellency. He’s very insistent…’

The Prince sighed again, louder and for effect.

‘Well, that does make a change,’ he said. ‘One cannot think of any man anywhere in more need of pleasuring himself each morning before venturing out into the world…’

‘I heard that!’ protested a familiar English voice from the room beyond.

As Talleyrand knew he would. One of the perks of ceasing to care.

*** * ***

‘I have news!’ said Sir Percy.

Of course he did. An inability to filter out the inessential meant he always did.

‘Gracious me!’ said Talleyrand

The third in a recent trinity of serious sighs came from Sir Percy.

‘I do wish you wouldn’t always say the same bloody th-…’

‘What is your news?’ interrupted Talleyrand.

That brought Sir Percy up short. It was too direct, not coated in greasy Gallic evasion. Then the spy-chief suddenly realised there were other things ‘wrong with this picture.’

For a start—and enough for a finish—the Prince was cravatless! Sir Percy should have been kept waiting for at least another hour whilst a swarm of effeminate flunkies dolled their master up like a wedding cake. Not only that but the infuriating superior smile was gone, and there were—Sir Percy took the trouble to count—one, two, three, strands of hair out of place!

Blakeney was not a bad man, when life permitted otherwise. He could be kind to children and lunatics. He felt a pang of compassion.

‘Are you well, Prince?’

Talleyrand was going to say ‘never better’ but out of nowhere a genuine fruity cough appeared. Dealing with it took some time.

‘We can do this some other time…,’ offered Sir Percy.

Talleyrand took out a peach coloured silk handkerchief and dabbed his mouth.

‘Actually, we cannot. I have something to impart to you. But I forget my manners: you spoke first. What is your news?’

Sir Percy recalled issues more important that some frog traitor’s health.

‘We’ve found that chap who deserted from the Heathrow Hecatomb knowing too much. Frankenstein. The one who went on the rampage with the Lazaran Lovelace woman…’

Talleyrand could still cut it, should he care to. His face was a mask. One hand gestured underwhelment.

‘One vaguely recalls…’

‘Well,’ said Sir Percy, ‘her husband—a friend of mine you’ll recall—has been running me ragged about her. Our ambassador in Rome has now picked up the trail. Apparently, Frankenstein has turned papist—perhaps he always was. A lot of foreigners are, apparently.’

Talleyrand would have winced if only he had the energy.

‘Really? Gracious me.’

Sir Percy winced for him but pressed on.

‘And now he’s spilling his guts to priests. Telling all. We can’t have that. The Pope’s already making a fuss of them—and you know how het up the Church gets about raising stiffs. Not only that but it looks like this Frankenstein chappie and her Ladyship are now an item. Very embarrassing for the Lovelace family. They’ve even adopted a Lazaran baby between them!’

Talleyrand sat up straight and one by one tucked in the stray strands of hair—which he’d been fully aware of.

‘Gracious me!’

It wasn’t the normal way he said it. There was meaning. He might even have added more had not the coughing returned. There was a spell of hacking before the Prince forced words out.

‘What do you propose?’

‘Well,’ Sir Percy was mildly embarrassed, ‘that’s where you come in. It’s in the nature of a favour I’m looking for here. There’s the good name of the Lovelaces to consider: an ancient and honourable English family. Plus we don’t want His Holiness roused up about the Hecatomb all over again, just when things had died down—if you’ll excuse the phrase…’

‘I don’t excuse it,’ said Talleyrand. ‘Make amends by speaking plain.’

Which was a bit rich, coming from him of all people, but Sir Percy was on the cadge and couldn’t cavil for the moment.

‘As you wish, Prince. Well, we thought perhaps we could kill two birds with one stone—if you’ll excuse the phr…. What I mean is, you must still have contacts out there, you being an ex-bishop and so forth.’

Talleyrand urged him on with his eyes and Sir Percy decided to go for broke.

‘Assassins,’ he said. ‘That’s the proposal. Not really our thing. But very much yours, we reckoned. Contacts from the old days maybe. Do you have people in Rome who could…’

‘Kill two birds with one stone?’ said Talleyrand for him.

‘Yes, just the two. There’s a servant with them but he can’t know much. He can live…’

Talleyrand cut in.

‘I do have such people, alas. But I have something else. Better. For you.’

Sir Percy leant back. He'd anticipated some sordid bargaining but this morning was going all awry and down unexpected avenues. He wished he'd had more coffee before setting out.

'Which is what?' he ventured hesitantly. If one should be cautious of Greeks bearing gifts then how much more so of this arachnid in human form…

'My job,' said Talleyrand, succinctly. 'It's yours.'

How well things always seemed to fall out for him, Talleyrand reflected, just like he was not a sinner at all! He'd fully intended to offer his resignation free of charge at this, their final meeting. Now he could sell it.

Sir Percy frowned.

'What would I want with that? I'm already your superior.'

Talleyrand arranged his face into a 'be-serious-this-is-important' look that was an expressive universe away from his usual blandness. The ground shifted alarmingly beneath Sir Percy's riding boots.

'My job,' the Prince went on in all earnest, 'could be yours. Fully. I'll resign and meddle no more. You'll be in sole charge.'

To give him credit, Sir Percy could be brutally honest with himself. He opened his mouth to protest—but then shut it, the words unsaid.

'Along with my agent networks: the whole lot,' said Talleyrand, spicing the deal. 'People—resources, that is to say— you've never dreamt of! With letters of recommendation for you to each one.'

If even half of what Sir Percy had heard was true that would be like becoming the greatest peeping-Tom ever. It had appeal.

'And all my files.' Talleyrand piled on the temptation to intolerable levels. 'Every scrap. War-winning information…'

Sir Percy knew of them: he had tried to subvert Loseley servants to steal samples but to no avail. If sincere, it was a mouth-watering prospect. But what a huge 'if''.

'Including the file about you and the lady choristers in Sussex,' added Talleyrand. 'The hamlet of Folkington wasn't it? A South Downs church. Such exquisitely curvaceous slopes and valleys—the Downs that is.'

'Yes,' agreed Blakeney, deadpan, 'exquisite.'

'Well, that's on offer too. Plus my draft letters on the subject—or was it 'outrage'—to the Times. Plus the illustrative woodcuts of events that I commissioned. You could have them framed for your walls—or perhaps burn them.'

That settled it. Lady Blakeney had said that the next time she'd take red-hot coal-tongs to his privates. Then she'd mimicked a vicious twisting movement…

'Probably burn,' said Sir Percy.

'I'm sure you know best,' said Talleyrand sympathetically.

'And in return?' asked Sir Percy. He was nervous, expecting a great deal to be asked for so much.

Talleyrand was as straightforward as anyone had seen him since the veil descended between he and humanity long ago. There was no nuance, no shadings, not even the slightest inflection of voice requiring interpretation.

'Don't kill them,' he said: demanded. 'Frankenstein or Lady Lovelace or the servant. Don't harm or silence them. Let them speak. Bring them home. Strain every sinew. Send the fleet. Send Nelson.'

Sir Percy realised he was experiencing a once-in-a-very-blue-moon-indeed moment. Compared to this Halley's Comet was a next-door neighbour you were sick of the sight of. He seized that moment.

'Done,' he said, and extended his hand.

For form's sake Talleyrand shook it, though the ritual added no extra solemnity to him. Indeed, Sir Percy's rough hand rather rasped…

It seemed a day for major sighs: or so Sir Percy misinterpreted it. In fact the sound was Talleyrand releasing the pent-up tension of a lifetime.

'*Nunc dimittis*,' said the Prince, with relief. 'Now let thy servant depart in peace.'

As though in answer, he was racked with coughing again. When he took the kerchief from his mouth he saw there was blood upon it.

Talleyrand raised his eyes to the ceiling—and by implication further still.

'Gracious me!' he said. 'Such prompt service!'

*** * ***

Coincidentally, later on that day a letter arrived for Talleyrand from the Pope, discreetly sealed, elegantly worded. Stranger still, it proposed much the same things as the Prince had urged on Sir Percy.

Which just shows you how odd history can be. Up to that point who would have bet a fake farthing that two such contrasted careers might coincide?

Chapter 12: EARNING EMMA

‘…in irons,’ Nelson added to his order.

‘In irons?’ Julius and Ada spoke in chorus—but could have sung it opera-style for all the good protesting did them. Even Frankenstein’s reasonable offer of medical assistance during the battle had been turned down.

‘In irons,’ the Admiral confirmed from his position of god-like authority on the poopdeck. ‘Because I am entrusted with your safety. And I do not trust you. Or like you. Oh, and Hardy,’—this to the captain of the Victory, just setting off to do his bidding.

‘Yes sir?’

‘If they give you trouble, flog them.’

‘Very good, sir.’

So it was that during the famous ‘Second Battle of Trafalgar’ Frankenstein and Lady Lovelace and Foxglove were securely confined below the waterline, safe from enemy shot or from seeing history unfold. The only things they could truthfully recount of being there were sails the size of postage stamps on the horizon and then hour upon hour of ear-splitting noise. Likewise, the only fighting they took part in was against waves of panicking rats sent scurrying across their laps by each thundering broadside.

None of which comprised a memoir worth publishing or even anecdotes worth repeating. The very best they could hope for was to boast being present at ‘Trafalgar II’—and then hope no one asked for further details.

All because, soon after the French fleet’s sailing was reported along the chain of English frigates stretching right to Cadiz, down into the Victory’s stinking depths they went, to be chained up alongside an American awaiting hanging for sodomy. Neither he nor they were cheerful company.

Ada might well be profoundly changed inside but externally she was still Lord Byron’s girl. Some of the phrases she used as they were bundled away brought blushes to the rough tough sailors carrying them. But for the

futility of flogging an unfeeling Lazaran back, a likewise shocked Captain Hardy would have implemented Neo-Nelson's threat of the cat o' nine tails.

There'd been no prior warning of such degradation. On the contrary, the Admiral had been absolutely jubilant that having them aboard had finally drawn the enemy fleet out.

'Five years of blockade and not a peep!' he'd exulted to them, shortly before the sudden exiling below. 'We couldn't tempt 'em out to battle whatever we did. I thought their ships would rot in port before I had a chance to sink the swine!'

In his excitement he'd even reverted to the broad Norfolk accent of his youth, such that there was some difficulty in understanding. His officers, the 'band of brothers' stood around amazed.

'Borr!' he told Frankenstein and Lady Lovelace, 'If I'd known old Boney wants what's in your noddles so bad I'd 'ave 'ad ye press-ganged years ago, painted purple and tied to the topmast! God bless 'ee!'

You could have construed that as flattery of some sort, but shortly after the Admiral turned and issued his harsh instructions.

'Dark-Nelson' indeed said Lady Lovelace—or words to that effect.

In a previous professional incarnation Frankenstein had treated the aftermath of a naval flogging. He didn't want his back similarly turned into steak tatare and so, unlike Ada, held his tongue. However, his mind was given full permission to think harsh things.

The most printable of which was that if Admiral Nelson's tactics were as unpredictable as his moods then the battle was as good as won.

Which it was. Gloriously and famously, after a tedious—to Julius and Ada and Foxglove and the American—long afternoon of continuous cannon fire, cries and the reek of powder smoke and blood from the surgeon's space above. As the day wore on—and how it wore on—huzzahs and jubilation were added to the heady mix of sound. British gunfire had always predominated, since Albion's Jack Tars could load and fire two shots to 'Jacque Crapaud's one, but eventually it was playing a solo. Even those imprisoned down in the murky gunnels could draw their own conclusions as firm as those on deck.

Late in the day they had a visitor. By Julius's pocketwatch it must have been evening outside (much difference it made to them) but Nelson's beaming visage lit up even their darkness, rendering his lantern redundant. His smile was such they could see every tooth, even the black back-molars.

Nor was that all they could see but would rather not. There was a gaping wound in his chest, obliterating the Order of the Bath, and another exactly where they'd got him last time, down through a shoulder epaulette and into his spine. The difference was that this time round Nelson was still standing—albeit crookedly. There was ragged flesh but no blood. At Trafalgar II the French snipers had been flogging a dead horse. Neo-Nelson was pumped so full of superior serum and unresolved ambitions it would have taken a broadside from a hundred-gunner to lay him low.

'We won!' he informed them. 'Ten sunk and twenty prizes!'

Lady Lovelace was still sour.

'And our losses?' she asked, out of malice. Julius could have punched her. Even Foxglove was tempted.

Nelson's face darkened.

'None! Of course not, woman. English ships don't strike their flags!'

'Did any Frenchies escape?' asked Julius, hurriedly.

'Not one!' replied the Admiral, Ada's faux paux forgotten. 'Not one! An annihilation victory!'

In the course of their brief acquaintance Nelson had impressed them as one of those rare specimens: the natural human predator. Accordingly, annihilation was his favourite word. Along with one other…

Somehow he was reminded of it. Suddenly the Admiral was no longer in the bowels of the Victory with them, nor riding a wave of a victory. Neo-Nelson was far away and in other company.

'They'll have to give me Emma now…,' he mused, turning abruptly plaintive. 'Won't they?'

Then even the condemned American's heart was touched as they saw the hero of the hour and age break down and weep—or as best as a Lazaran can.

Chapter 13: A SWEET TREAT

Admiral—soon to be High-Admiral and Earl—Neo-Nelson wasn't with them. Which was a relief frankly. Ever since setting foot on English soil he and thus they had been mobbed night and day by worshipping crowds. Characteristically quick to seize an opportunity, he had drawn the hordes to besiege the Admiralty whilst he lobbied within for Emma Hamilton's revival. He reckoned the just-this-side-of-hysteria baying of 'Nel-son! Nel-son!' rattling the windows would do his cause a power of good.

Rightly so. A letter would go from Whitehall to the French Government that very night and set off a very grisly series of events. One of the secrets not even Napoleon knew was that Lady Hamilton had already been raised but then lost. She currently walked elsewhere and in a very curious frame of mind—but that's another story.

Meanwhile, Frankenstein and Ada and Foxglove's story went like this. The pungent Port of London where they finally landed gave way to the cacophony of the City and debriefings in the wasps'-nest of the War Ministry. Then the summons from Talleyrand arrived, superseding all other claims on their time.

Though quicker, the trains were not trusted. Too high-profile and disruptable. Napoleon's agents had but to bend a rail and then what? Instead, whisked away in a Government stagecoach with outriders, they cleaved through London's smoke and congestion out into open country. The air and sunshine, even that little they smelt and saw of either, was welcome, compensating for the haste and hurried comfort-stops at coaching inns.

Just a few action-packed months before, Frankenstein had moped at a window of the Heathrow Hecatomb and watched the '413th regiment of Revived Foot' march off to war in Germania. Now, somewhat older and wiser he unknowingly followed their route to within sight of Loseley House. There, happily, the re-enactment ended.

The more distance put between them and 'BABYLONdon'—what the exiled Cobbett and other members of the opposition 'Golden-age Reactionary Party' termed 'the Great Wen'—the greener it got. For, despite centuries of ceaseless demands from the shipyards and cannon-foundries

much of the ancient Wealden forest survived. Not only that, but they took a discreet route, off the obvious roads. Dark little villages populated by dark little villagers could be glimpsed to either side as the coach rushed through to Surrey's more modern-world market towns. Then, several changes of horses later the horizon suddenly broadened. There before them were the North Downs and Loseley House.

The coach turned off the road onto a driveway. There were soldiers, strange soldiers in skirts with few social skills. Once past them Julius dared poke his head out and beheld a gracious dwelling built of old stone recycled from another place. Before its grand frontage labourers were stacking timber into a pyramidal pile.

There was no time to enquire about that or anything else. Even their earlier simple 'where?' questions had been only grudgingly and partially answered. Now the coach door was wrenched open the second they halted and its inmates allowed minimal time to stretch their legs (or leg in Foxglove's case) and stare at the new scene.

The high ridge of the Downs bounded one horizon and a road ran along it, complete with toy horsemen and vehicles. That was the route normal and sensible coaches took. Below in the valley were silent woodland and landscaped gardens. A place of peace.

Normally. Right now it seemed to be nothing but frenzied comings and goings. To the eternal hills who'd seen it all before and would see it all again, such transient fevers were presumably nothing, but short-spanned humans were more easily impressed.

They arrived just as a delegation of high-flying Churchmen fled. Considering that they dealt with matters infinite the men of God should have looked more composed than they did. Red-faced exasperated expressions topped some of the clerical collars.

But at least that supplied a spot of colour, for otherwise the flood of black issuing from Loseley would have been in total contrast to Ada's scarlet (gown) and white (skin), Frankenstein's dandy waistcoat and the gay motley of their Highland soldiers escort. With the addition palette of Church of England rage or blushes, a charitable eye might mistake the two groups as the same species.

Except that they were heading in different directions. The two parties intermingled, inter-penetrated and then parted without a word. One had

come to supply enlightenment and failed, the other now arrived in hope to receive it.

For Talleyrand was dying. It was common knowledge and the only thing about him all could agree on. There was even a tinge of sadness felt here and there, leading to sporadic acts of kindness. Frankenstein had noticed straw strewn on Loseley's gravel drive to muffle the rattle of coach wheels, and churchmen had volunteered their time to come and shrive the sinner. Even some French relatives and/or former lovers had travelled on specially issued 'compassionate passports' to an enemy realm to say farewell—or something.

All in all, for a departing soul preparing to meet his Maker, Talleyrand had a packed program and Julius envisaged having to await their turn in the queue that snaked up the main staircase to the deathbed.

Far from it. Immediately that news of their arrival reached the Prince they were sent for in no uncertain terms. Frankenstein and co were sped through a portrait festooned Great Hall complete with suits of mismatched armour and a minstrels' gallery. Then chivvied up the ornate carved stairs past suspected old master paintings without opportunity to study either. Outraged others before them in the queue muttered harsh words but their skirted soldier escort deterred anything worse. Within minutes they were ushered into the presence.

And what a presence—still. It filled the room, along with the scent of death. The Prince was propped up in bed on countless pillows and his cravat had never looked crisper or more carefully confected.

But that was the sum of the good news. Talleyrand no longer needed powder to pale his cheeks. Instead, rouge was now required to de-deathshead his face. His chest heaved for breath that was reluctant to come. His eyes were closed against the world.

Yet somehow he seemed to know they had come. Shut eyelids were not signs of surrender but screens across the intimate process of rallying his remaining force.

They heard a sigh of relief. There was the distinct, if illogical, feeling of being studied without being seen.

They'd not met before, not in the flesh. Frankenstein, Lady Lovelace and Foxglove stood in line abreast like culprits brought before the headmaster and wondered what, if anything, to say. Meanwhile, nurses bustled around justifying their being there, and doctors held conference. A

residual prelate lurked in the shadows of the four-poster on the off-chance the Prince would relent and sign the retraction that lay unscrolled on the bedspread.

Suddenly, the Princely pink shutters opened. The painted lips likewise.

Talleyrand tried to speak but was out of practice. Only a cough emerged, horribly liquid. A nurse dabbed at him but was gestured back.

The Prince swallowed, ventured a silent dry-run and then had another go.

‘Welcome,’ he said, gaining confidence. ‘Welcome, welcome! Thank you so much for coming…’

Once, not so long ago, Ada might have said ‘did we have any choice?’ Which would have been honest but inappropriate. Today she just thought it and smiled instead.

Frankenstein also. He’d heard of the man’s famous charm but was still impressed it should remain so persuasive, even teetering at Death’s door. Waves of that warm force washed against all, disarming them of any resentment they might be harbouring.

‘The pleasure is all ours,’ said Julius.

Talleyrand smiled: he wished to husband his strength but could not prevent himself.

‘Liar,’ he said, though without malice. ‘This room reeks of sickness. The Angel of Death peeks through its keyhole. Only a ghoul could take pleasure in such a place. But you mean well, for which I thank you. Yet that is the least of things I should thank you for…’

He had to pause and regroup. His audience mistook that for final exhaustion but it wasn’t so. Instead, the Prince returned to the charge, revived for a sustained offensive. He gulped for air and grasped the bedspread like a drowning man, but at the same time seemed set fair to hurtle down a preconceived path, bearing all before him. Onlookers saw the polished politician he’d once been and was now again— perhaps for the last time.

‘The priests want me to recant,’ he said. ‘To formally repent of my life and actions. And I shall, albeit in my own good time and with certain reservations. It will make them happy and also supply a certain symmetrical form to my saga. However, before all that I must explain some things to you. And ask your pardon…’

‘Why?’ said Ada, who could still be sledgehammer blunt.

Talleyrand looked on her with appraising relish. In times gone by she would not have been safe alone with him, Lazaran or not.

‘Two reasons,’ he answered. ‘Firstly, vanity. A weakness for sure, but perhaps I may be excused such indulgence in my present state. It will please me that others shall understand my extreme cleverness and cunning. Therefore, I intend to outline my great scheme to you, and your part in it…’

‘No need,’ snapped Lady Lovelace. ‘I already know.’

‘Oh,’ said Talleyrand, but took it well.

‘Glimpsing it got me my spark back,’ she continued. For which I suppose I should thank you. Even if you did play us like puppets. However, given that there are still details which remain obscure I wish to keep in your favour. Therefore, thank you, sweet Prince. Now, may I enquire-…?’

Talleyrand spread his hands in invitation.

‘By all means my dear. I am at your disposal as once you were at mine, albeit unaware. Until the Grim Reaper arrives, that is. Then, alas, his summons overrules even your appeal…’

Ada drew up a chair without asking permission.

‘Right then: first off, did I need to die?’

Talleyrand looked pained beyond his present afflictions. He sighed regretfully.

‘That was one of the things for which I have to ask forgiveness,’ he said, ‘of both you and the Church. My dear lady, I confess I was of two minds on the subject and erred on the side of caution. You might have trod the path I required without it, but I needed to be sure. What I could be confident of was that you would have left instruction for such an eventuality. And that your death would powerfully motivate you…’

He paused, subject to a pang of regret, or perhaps even shame, before pressing on to spoil the moment.

‘Or would I have got away with it if I protested I never intended things should go so far? What if I’d said my Lazaran agents got out of control—as they so often do? Might you have believed that?’

Ada equivocated.

‘Normally no,’ she answered. ‘But in your silky presence? Who knows.’

Talleyrand winced.

‘Then I have blundered. To miss a chance to deceive in a good cause like that; to incur enmity without need! What a lapse!’

Frankenstein’s rectitude was offended.

‘I thought, sir,’ he said, ‘that today was a time for honesty, however disobliging, however lacerating.’

Talleyrand conceded it cheerfully.

‘Indeed so, Swiss sir. I apologise; the habits of a lifetime die hard.’

He coughed blood again but transcended it.

‘As do I, apparently. However, let me set myself on the straight path again. Madame, permit me to say it formally: I am very sorry my plans required killing you. Likewise with my mischief to poor Mr Babbage…’

‘I did wonder about that,’ said Lady Lovelace. ‘Why him as well?’

‘Two birds with one stone,’ Talleyrand interrupted. Firstly, I understood that his “Analytical Engine” required aborting, in the sure knowledge it would lead to more efficient means of killing: weapons of mass destruction, even! Moreover, if developed in England they would have been deployed against the land of my birth and affections.’

‘True,’ Ada agreed without rancour. ‘That was our next project after the gambling applications.’

‘‘Though it must be said,’ conceded Talleyrand, ‘I erred on the side of caution. Babbage is a mere mechanic who might have changed things. Whereas you, madame, are the type who will change ideas. History dances to the tunes of ideas.’

Ada acknowledged the compliment.

‘However, over-cautious or not,’ he went on, ‘I surmised that you would seek Babbage’s help. I prevented it. I wished you to be friendless: thrown back on to your own formidable devices. Your appalling energies had to be fully liberated to carry you where I wished you to go—and to finally kill this terrible thing.’

Which begged a very obvious question, but Ada declined to be predictable. Talleyrand approved and continued.

‘If it is any comfort, my dear, I have seen to it that Babbage does not suffer in prison. Nor shall he in the humble but harmless employment I have arranged for after his release. Welsh-speaking Patagonia is calling out for men of such talent I’m told.’

‘Oh, all right then,’ said Ada equably, with more forgiveness than was hers to give. ‘All’s well that ends well. The pieces fit now. Your intervention had the effect you intended of setting me on my way. Presumably, you also guessed my former husband would not revive me.’

‘Hardly a guess,’ confirmed the Prince, ‘more like a certainty. Such a dull dog of a man. ‘Whatever possessed you to link with that dreary—’

‘Money,’ Ada cut in, cutting it short. ‘But moving on, you likewise must have known I would seek out the foremost man in the Revivalist field…’

Talleyrand acknowledged Frankenstein with a bed-bound bow.

‘…but even he,’ Ada continued, ‘could not give the entirety of what I wanted.’

‘No,’ Talleyrand concurred. ‘I thought not, and moreover had chosen you precisely because you were a person of unbounded wants. What did you call it? Your “spark’”. How quaint. No, no Lazaran has that.’

He peered at her, more innocently this time.

‘Or leastways, not until now. But be that as it may, I knew I could safely assume that you—I even dared to hope both of you—would crusade forth to seek what was missing. You would traverse the leading edge of research, press the most perilous sources of knowledge and badger away at what is presently hid. First Heathrow, then Compiegne, and finally to my ultimate aim, Versailles, and the Emperor’s dastardly plans.’

‘And then..?’ Ada prompted.

Talleyrand shrugged—and found that it hurt.

‘At the very least,’ he obliged, ‘the glare of publicity. Or, better still, stolen secrets. Boney greatly feared both. What I didn’t dare dream of was an explosion, a stolen child, even an instruction manual! Plain proof for all the world to see! My dears, what a force of nature you are when combined! And cruel nature at that, red in tooth and claw. Bravo! Bravo!’

He tried to applaud but the effort was too much. The Prince had to revise his plans in order to have the strength to outline them. Some of the more sensitive there, including Frankenstein and Ada, averted their eyes to avoid seeing him reduced to this.

Fortunately, cover for his difficulties was provided by an invasion of the room. Deftly swerving the arms put out to detain her, a golden-haired child of perhaps five or six years dashed in. She made a bee-line for the bed, brushing between Foxglove’s walking-stick and Ada’s gown, and threw herself aboard.

The Prince received the arrival with joy and waved back those who would retrieve her.

‘Spring and autumn!’ he told the assembly as he accepted the child’s hand in his. ‘Spring and autumn!’

‘Spring and winter,’ corrected the priest from the shadows. ‘Deepest winter.’ And he pointed to the unsigned retraction on the bedspread.

Talleyrand had always had the greatest affection for Truth, even though he could never be faithful to her. He acknowledged her presence now.

‘Winter? Yes, you are right,’ he said. ‘But sometimes sunshine transforms even the most wintry day.’

His fingers transferred a kiss (and perhaps a blessing) from his lips to the child’s smooth brow. She nestled against him.

‘My great-great niece,’ he explained to the uninitiated. ‘And appropriately termed, for she has been a great great comfort to my twilight.’

The priest and some servants frowned, for they couldn’t recall him making a fuss of her before. Maybe, like so much else, he’d done so privately in the labyrinth of his mind.

‘Uncle,’ asked the child, getting round to the purpose of her visit in her own good time, ‘it is true you are going?’

Talleyrand smiled and nodded.

‘It is, child; yes.’

‘Where to?’

‘I’m not sure, my dear.’

The priest signalled he might have a shrewd idea, but had the grace not to interrupt.

‘Will you come back, uncle?’

Talleyrand shook his head.

‘I’m afraid not, my sweet. Or rather, I am not afraid, because it is time for me to go.’

She looked up at him.

‘Like when it’s time for me to go to bed?’

Talleyrand agreed as vigorously as he could.

‘Precisely. And I’ve heard tales that you make problems about that. Therefore, take your example from your great-great uncle who is a good boy and always does what he is told.’

She wasn’t going to have that. The Prince was able to deceive diplomats but not innocence.

‘I don’t think you’re going to bed. You’re already in bed! I think you’re going to die.’

Talleyrand considered that like it was news.

‘Do you know,’ he said after a while, ‘I do believe you’re right! What a clever girl you are!’

She looked round the po-faced gathering of grown-ups but found nothing of interest there. Even Ada’s Lazaran features detained her only a second.

‘Mama doesn’t want you to die,’ she went on. ‘Not yet. She’s been crying. She says you won’t say sorry to God. She says you’re going to a bad place.’

Talleyrand looked grave.

‘Even mamas can be wrong,’ he said. ‘But listen to this and then be sure to tell her…’

The Prince elevated his face and dignity.

‘Sorry!’ he said, loud and clear, to the upper air. ‘I’m very, very, sorry.’

The child clapped her hands with glee.

‘When I tell mama she might let me stay up late tonight!’

Talleyrand shrank to her level and confided.

‘Tell her I order it!’ he said. ‘Now, hush a moment while we big-people conclude some boring business. And while you are waiting you may have some sweets.’

He gestured that the bowl of bon-bons beside the bed be brought over. It was a rainbow of tempting shapes and colours guaranteed to titillate a jaded palate or silence a child.

‘Except that one,’ said Talleyrand, quite stern for him and pointing out one particular sweet set aside. ‘That is Uncle’s favourite.’

With that warning the child dived in and had soon spoiled her dinner.

‘Now,’ he asked the priest, ‘has the Archbishop gone?’

‘He has, highness. Back to his lodgings to rest. He was exhausted.’

‘No,’ corrected the Prince. ‘He was exhausting. But since that is so, give me the retraction. So long as he’s not here to gloat, I’ll sign.’

The priest rushed at it. He saw a soul to save and fame for himself. Great things in this life and the next might come to he who’d converted a commanding-officer of the forces of darkness.

Talleyrand took a pen from him too. He scanned the proffered scroll with care, striking out a line or two here, adding an alternative word there,

each time earning a priestly frown. However, the prize was such he was left to it and in due course a signature was appended. The Prince even managed a flourish of the pen—and then in words too.

‘There, now you have it,’ he said, handing back the historic document. ‘But let me add this in verbal and thus ephemeral form, for veracity’s sake. I believed life was a vale of tears and hard on humanity: because for reasons best known to Himself the good Lord constructed it so. Nevertheless, I hoped that what the Church taught was correct. However, I feared that nothing was true and everything was permissible. Now I go from here to find out the truth of the matter.’

It wasn’t exactly a retraction of his retraction but… Still, the second was mere words and the first on parchment. One would outdistance the other.

Perhaps. Such unique honesty, from this man of all people, silenced all present. Some even committed it to memory to record later, thus rendering the apologia less fleeting than envisaged. Exactly as the Prince intended…

‘And now you must go too,’ he told the priest. ‘Though not like me. Go spread the good news to your hierarchy. I still have a modicum of worldly business left to conduct.’

Exit the cleric. Talleyrand returned to his invited guests.

‘Where were we? Oh yes: about what successful agents you were. Unwitting agents but wildly successful. Maybe that is the best way: when humans introduce their own petty agendas things go askew. They should defer to genius and be guided.’

With a pout Lady Lovelace conceded the principle, if not their relative roles.

Talleyrand didn’t notice and continued.

‘Of course, there were other, conscious, recruits I sent out into the world but they fell by the wayside. Or at least I heard no more of them. One fears they fell into the hands of Fouché.’

‘As did we,’ said Lady Lovelace. ‘Do you wish to see Foxglove’s scars?’

The servant modestly drew his coat together as if to discourage the offer. Talleyrand grimaced.

‘No thank you. Simply consider them the medals you deserve but shall not receive. Badges of honour…’

That did it. That touched upon Frankenstein's sore point, or rather the one his Father had drummed into him. As did his father before him. And his father before him… probably right back to Adam.

''Honour'?' he queried. 'I do not see the honour in any of this!'

The Prince could be kind to children and courteous to womenfolk, depending on what he was after, but grown men, he felt, really should keep up to speed. And besides, time was too short for limping thinking.

'Then look closer, sir,' he snapped. 'And if that fails, allow me to spell it plain. Xavier…?'

A sleek looking servitor emerged from obscurity, discreet efficiency personified.

'Highness?'

'The letters, if you please.'

From a locked portion of the bedside cupboard came an armful of letters, all sealed, all portentous. When handed them Talleyrand examined each address.

'Constantinople, the Ottoman Empire,' he read aloud from one, and then flung it to Frankenstein's feet. 'That better be you, I think: they'll not listen to a woman. Also have Vienna, the Hapsburg Empire: you're vaguely middle-Europe: they'll appreciate that…' Another missive joined Julius' portion.

To Lady Lovelace went:

'America: the President and Senate,' read Talleyrand. 'Yes: ideal. Wear that scarlet gown or one similar. And flash those eyes as I've seen you do. No rouge though: don't try to conceal your status. Americans are simple but shrewd folk. Speak slowly as you would to a rustic and without embellishment. I was there in exile for a while, you know. It is a primitive country at present but destined for greatness—or what passes for it in this world. And sooner than people think. It is down to you to determine what sort of greatness. Wean them off Lazarans to good honest slavery. Then allow some future other to wean them off slaves.'

Talleyrand paused for breath and coughed red into his kerchief again. Meanwhile, in an act of mutual solidarity, neither Julius or Ada stooped to pick up their assigned letters.

'What exactly,' said she for them both, 'are these?'

'Letters of recommendation,' answered the Prince crisply. 'And most fulsome ones. My word still counts for something among the worldly, and

still will do even when I speak from beyond the grave. Those pieces of paper will gain you admission to the highest echelons of government. Not only that, but I am informed that comparable passports will be provided by his Holiness the Pope for those regions of the globe where his word counts.'

Lady Lovelace still did not stoop to collect or accept her mission.

'To what end?' she asked, beating Frankenstein to it by a sliver.

Talleyrand looked at them full on.

'To what end?' he said to Ada. 'The end of your kind!' Then to Julius. 'And the end of your trade. We must wipe out this satanic science world-wide!'

And then and thus they understood in full. But Talleyrand gave them no chance to relish the revelation.

' "Lo, and Jacob called his sons to bless them",' he quoted, drawing on his own distant memories of priesthood, ' "and he said, 'Gather together and I will tell you what will happen to you in the end of days'…"'

The Prince actually did beckon them closer. Reluctantly gathering up the letters they came.

'It will be difficult without Lazarans,' he said, 'but worse with them. When the nations learn what Bonaparte proposes, what he has done, they will ally against him. Humanity will unite against its superseding—which is the one and only cause that will ever unite it. There will be a crusade: a world-war. And there will be civil war wherever Lazarans are the mainstay of the economy, as in America. Those places must again substitute negro slaves: until such time as conscience forbids that too. Also, the Churches will split between the honest and the bought. There will be actual and spiritual strife throughout the world; and it will be vile and long and hard but eventually France will lose. And since I love France and have only ever sought its well-being—the one consistent thread in all I have done—then I am sadly glad of that. But beforehand the Convention and Napoleon will contest together: oh, if only both could lose! There will be scope for true patriots to save France. Because it must not be just foreign armies that sweep both the Convention fanatics and the Napoleon monster and his would-be eternal empire away. Ditto a foreign occupation. Both have been tried before and would only unite all Frenchmen against them. This time it must be my way: the slow but sure way. Only then can France be what it truly is and be loved again…'

An unlikely prophet, Talleyrand relinquished his exhausting grip upon futurity in order to regroup for one final push.

‘This will be your unenviable lot,’ he said. ‘To be in the middle of much unpleasantness. To be both its cause but also its cure.’

He turned to Ada.

‘You know what you are,’ he said. ‘And being a unique sentient version of it surely you realise this all must stop. Stop with you.’

Ada bowed her head and thought.

‘And you,’ Talleyrand addressed Frankenstein, ‘you know full well what wrongness your ancestor unleashed. That is what drove you half mad. That too must stop.’

Julius did not deny it. The Prince pressed his point home.

‘I offer you hope. There is the chance to make amends. You are or you have the evidence of the wrong you represent: Lady Lovelace’s mind, the unnatural child, the book of instruction and so on. Now,’ he indicated the letters of introduction, ‘you also have transport to take that evidence to the rulers of this afflicted world. All that is wanting is eloquence on your part. That I cannot give: it must come from your own inner conviction. Do you have it?’

Ada and Julius looked one to the other. The speed of the mind is such that they reviewed their life story in time to reply without unmannerly delay.

Lady Lovelace nodded. Frankenstein likewise.

Talleyrand seemed to shrink and merge back into the pillows. The child beside him whimpered.

But he was not gone. Not yet. He rallied.

‘That is good,’ he said, now in a whisper. ‘Napoleon must be denied his dynasty, lest being cleverer and colder than humans they supplant mankind. Also, generals must not have their armies of undead lest we end civilisation with ceaseless war. All this… evil must end. The world is for the living and no others: the dead have had their day. Heaven claims them and is not cheated with impunity. Humanity must be natural again!’

A simple enough statement, but a strategic vision that cut across all the complexities of politics and policy. Normal striving for petty advantage sways few men of goodwill, but a vision: that is different. A vision can alter history.

Talleyrand studied them—and was content.

‘Oh,’ he said, ‘and take the servant with you.’ He indicated Foxglove. ‘You owe him that for his love. Besides, even with one leg he is the strongest of you all. Maybe, madame, you should marry him: that might constitute some small reward.’

Foxglove blushed to the roots of his hair. Lady Lovelace raised one eyebrow—but did not dismiss the idea.

‘Or wed the doctor,’ the Prince nodded at Julius. ‘He would do too. It hardly matters…’

Nor did it compared to the weightier matters afoot. Talleyrand realised that in addressing such minutiae he had lingered overlong. He had done what he could with the broad brush strokes: mere detail had to be delegated—forever.

‘Time for that delectable sweet, I think,’ he told his niece. ‘Would you be so kind as to pass the plate, child?’

She would. The Prince partook and soon died of the poison within.

Chapter 14: LOSELEY LIBERATION DAY

It was like setting in motion a well-oiled machine. No sooner had Talleyrand's soul quit the frame that had carried it across nine lively decades than swarms of servants took over the room to carry out his final wishes.

Two separate flunkies found they had the job of destroying his journals but in the spirit of the moment they did not bicker but instead assisted each other. Every worldly-wise page was shredded and each scrap fed to a furnace. History and humanity both lost and gained thereby.

Meanwhile, faithful Xavier led the squad which ensured their author met a similar fate. Wrapped in a simple shroud, the sometime Prince de Beavente, latterly Lord Vectis, but always Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand Perigord, was borne down through Loseley house out to the huge pyre awaiting.

Then, with little ceremony, and no words but much urgency, his body was committed to the flames. A torch ignited the primed timber. There was not much flesh left on him at the end. The puppeteer who'd had his hand up all Europe was gone within minutes.

In many eyes it was the final scandal in a long life full of them. Some said it was another slap in the face to the Church and implicit denial of the Credal 'Resurrection of the Body'. Given the notoriety he had acquired over the years that became the default view.

However, the perceptive realised that the Prince would never insult someone whose services he might soon need, whether it be the Almighty or a milkmaid. To that tiny minority it was but a short leap of commonsense to arrive at the truth. The Prince wished to put himself beyond those who might revive him before Judgement Day.

Meanwhile, on the day of his departure, the great and good were not present as they would have wished to be, even if only to check he really was gone. The massed clerics had only just received his amended retraction and were still fuming in their lodgings nearby. As in life so in death: the Prince's speed of thinking left them standing.

Instead, Frankenstein and Ada and Foxglove and the crack cravat team served as Talleyrand's sole mourners. Which was probably as he would

have preferred it.

They stood and watched as the smoke from his burning rose far into the Surrey sky—and possibly as high as Heaven.

Chapter 15: WORLD LIBERATION DAY

From: Words that Changed the World—Great Speeches of Modern History

(University Press of the Sorbonne, Paris 1895)

‘…and I, being sentient although what is called a “Lazaran”, being possessed of that spark which makes a man a man and child of God, ask this. How can it be that we dare wrench from the grave that which the Almighty has taken to Himself? Do we know better than He?

‘Further, how can we presume to make that poor wretch our slave? Is it not an insult both to He who made us and he who was made? We outrage a being who was as we are; who is as we shall be.

‘And yes, is it not the gravest of insults to our dignity as a race that we should persist with this perversion of human ingenuity, that noble calling, which we call science?

‘Gentlemen of the Senate and Congress, Mr President, I put it to you that here, today, you have it in your power to sweep away this gross shame brought on our species, to start a new day when Life is reserved to those for whom Providence intended it!

‘And if I, the first—and perhaps through your intervention the last—of my kind can find it in my ransomed soul to make this plea, how much stronger comes the cry from my brothers and sisters revived to half-life, to indignity and ceaseless labour, to an existence—yes mere existence—devoid of dignity and any wider hope?

‘There will be those—I suspect in this noble-hearted Republic they will be few in number—but there will be those whose narrow souls say, “why should I liquidate my Lazaran plantations, my undead-worked prairies on some mere point of principle? Why should others, less scrupulous, derive a commercial advantage? For Heaven’s sake,” they might say, “we let our Negroes go, but still you’re not satisfied!”

‘But I have a answer for them, gentlemen, if I may make so bold as a mere Englishwomen to suggest one on your behalf. And it is this:

‘Your words are happily chosen: we do what we do for Heaven’s sake—and in hope of gaining it and God’s favour for our nation. But we also do

it because our good name cannot be bought for dollars! We are patriots! We are Americans!’

—Lady Ada Lovelace’s joint address to the USA legislature and executive. May 1st 1840: immediately prior to the abolitionist debate of Emancipation Day.

* * *

‘But I have a answer for them, excellencies, if I may make so bold as a mere Swiss infidel to suggest one on your behalf. And it is this…

‘Yes, we do what we do for Paradise’s sake—and in hope of gaining it and Allah’s favour on the Ummah, the community of the faithful. But we also do it because our good name cannot be bought for the fripperies of this fleeting world! We fear the Day of Judgement! We are Muslims!’

—Dr Julius Frankenstein’s address to the Sublime Porte and Grand Mufti of Constantinople. May 1st 1840—immediately prior to the abolitionist fatwah of Emancipation Day.

* * *

Fortunately, publication was not so swift or widespread in those days. Ada and Julius’ suspiciously similar words were not immediately matched. They got away with it.

Surely Talleyrand would have looked down (or perhaps up) and smiled.

After which it came to pass pretty much as the Prince predicted, although it took decades. Napoleon would have cursed him all the more had he known—except what insult is there upwards of ‘shit in a silk stocking’?

Epilogue: TOMMOROW (& YESTERDAY) BELONGS…

The American Civil War whimpered to a close and anti-Revivalist laws were enforced both there and in the ‘Old Countries’ too. Peripheral aberrations aside, Revivalism became taboo in most civilised parts of the world.

Towards the end, even the lowest Lazarans grasped what was being done on their behalf and came over to the Abolitionist side. After that final victory was assured.

Granted, there were still grim patches and unfinished business. For instance, dark rumours spread of what was going on in Haiti and Martinique. The oppression there had very great and retribution likewise. What comes around goes around. Apparently, Lazaran former slaves had taken charge there and feasted on their former owners like farm animals: but in slow-motion, limb by limb. Restorative expeditions went in but failed to come out.

Also Japan emerged from its seclusion, learnt of Revivalism and decided they’d like to borrow that too, along with rifles and finance capitalism. No amount of persuasion could persuade them otherwise. So, no sooner had the ‘Great Powers’ steam fleets dragged Nippon out of purdah than they plunged it back again, via blockade and quarantine. Even so, there seemed a frightening amount of activity in those arsenals and cemeteries that could be glimpsed from offshore. Christendom couldn’t bombard a whole nation into submission. Or could it? Some Admirals saw that as a challenge…

And as for what went on in the obscurity of the Brazilian jungle, the refuge of runaway Revivalists, the least said the better. No one went there any more, except bounty hunters and/or madmen. Sullen silence fell over much of the southern continent.

But France succumbed, eventually, which was the main thing. Napoleon and the Convention fell out, as such people always eventually do, just as Talleyrand predicted. In the ensuing interval of civil war the armies of the rest of Europe took their opportunity. As did Minister Fouché, whose ‘patriotic coup d-etat’ was a lasting success, not least for him. For a while.

But Napoleon’s final throw puzzled all…

* * *

At the end of all this madness and human inhumanity, Napoleon sat not on a throne but a folding camp-stool. That resting place for his bum in turn sat upon the Russian steppe on an autumnal evening. The sole advantage his famed tactical eye could discern from there was that snow was antiseptic.

For His Imperial Highness would have far preferred to be in the comfortable and germ-free environment of the Palace of Versailles, but Destiny decreed otherwise. The Emperor went along with that: because one thing you could say for the (ex) man was that he always ate what was put before him.

Mind you, if so, he was dining on a dog’s dinner. His normal insistence on strict protocol was suspended the same way as concerns about infection. Right now for instance, Napoleon Bonaparte was having to take unabashed criticism—indeed abuse!—from his Marshals and senior generals, the same ungrateful wretches he’d personally raised from obscurity to greatness and gold braid.

His children, his dynasty, should have been some support but weren’t. It transpired that loyalty wasn’t uppermost in their natures—unlike ambition. The Emperor-in-exile had been obliged to execute some for plotting and worse. Which was, when he considered it, an awful waste of all his effort, not to mention those traumatic ‘galvanic enemas’…

The first few were dealt with discreetly by poisoning their serum, but their depressingly frequent successors got to meet Madame Guillotine. There was entertainment for the rabble in that, so Napoleon reasoned, in thus seeing the high and mighty brought low. Not to mention a fable for all the family, with a strong moral and, most importantly, a hundred per cent record of reform.

So much for ‘reason.’ The policy did prove educational, but not in the way intended. The plots simply got more subtle and in the end, to avoid a King Herod style massacre of offspring, the Emperor was obliged to be forgiving. It ran contrary to his nature, but, looking on the bright side, served to keep him on his toes when advancing years meant natural

brilliance might be dimming. However, family meals became a trifle fraught (and crowded) when bodyguards and food tasters easily outnumbered the guests.

But now that Napoleon and his army were on the march (or on the run, to be specific) there was no time for decorum. Family traitors were dealt with en route, and handy trees roped in to hang them from. It made a very public point but proved a bad idea in terms of time-saving. Lazarans, even this new breed of demi-Lazarans, took a frustratingly long time to die by strangulation. In the end, troops were called in to tug on the feet till the head came off.

Yet Bonaparte's devilish luck still held. Even such sordid spectacles proved grist to the Imperial mill. As it passed by the army reflected that if the Emperor behaved thus to his own kin, then what mercy could others hope for? Their resolve about marching into Muscovite mists temporarily stiffened.

However, like all moods, that passed, to be replaced by something more truculent as the first snows started to fall. Casualties due to cold began and mass desertions occurred for the hovering clouds of Cossacks to hunt down. Like some put-upon mule, the army slowed and then finally stopped dead without being told to.

The Emperor was equal to it. He knew that swine sometimes needed the food-pail rattled to tempt them on. The regiments were gathered round and megaphones set up for him to address as many as possible simultaneously.

For the occasion, the survivors of the Imperial family purges stood in a semi-circle around their father, radiating a personal chill to add to the winding-down-towards-winter steppe ambience. Their gold braid and lace and scarlet finery not only failed but actually highlighted their feeble frames and parchment faces. The whinging military wilted under their inhuman steady stare.

Even so, now was the time the generals found collective strength to hold their ground, to bring their private grumbling out into the open. The Emperor had carried them this far via a dazzling series of manoeuvre victories which left the Allied armies behind, bruised and baffled. That campaign right the length of Europe probably constituted the technical summit of his career—but what had it gained them or him in the long term? Those enemy armies weren't going away. They remained strong enough in

conjunction to crush this last Grande Armée. It was even said a Neo-Wellington had been raised, in contravention of all the anti-Revivalist legislation, to supervise that end-game.

Meanwhile, deep in enemy territory, all Napoleon's men could see was the scorched earth of Mother Russia and signs of the onset of that infamous winter that had swallowed an entire French invasion last time around.

'What's this?' called out a junior general. '1812 all over again?'

That first brave voice of protest was supported—once he wasn't immediately shot down. Murmurs mounted into cacophony.

The general thrust was that Napoleon was adding to the world's sum of stupidity and that his rank and file were… well, concerned about this. Apparently, they were concerned to the point of mutiny and stringing him up.

Then Napoleon stood and, through pure personal force, silenced them—for a moment. Which was enough.

In deference to decency and Imperial dignity rather than to the cold, he was clothed in a wrap-around coat of cloth of gold. The Emperor drew it about himself and plunged one hand within to strike an iconic pose.

'Frenchmen!' he roared, in a voice not in keeping with his shrunken state. 'Citizens! Friends! You have come with me this far. We have prevailed against invincible odds with the proverbial two men *et un chien*. You have shown faith! And now I shall repay that faith. Men unborn will count themselves cursed that they were not here today. And that is because this day I will take you into my confidence—as friends do…'

The soldiers and all within earshot looked from one to another. This was new. During the Revolution and then under the Convention, the great motivator was fear. With the Emperor it was fear and orders. Plus excitement sometimes, from jumping aboard the speeding stagecoach of the Imperial project. But as partners? 'Friends' even? They thought not. Here was heady novelty—enough to postpone the shouting and prolong listening.

Neo-Napoleon had perfect timing, both on the battlefield and as a demagogue. He'd paused for effect and then suddenly plunged in.

'I have brought you back here to a purpose: an end; namely the end thirty years ago of my first *Grande Armée*. But also to a new beginning. That army, the biggest and best—present company excepted—army that France ever raised, is still with us. It lies here! The corpses of half a million elite warriors reside in pits from here to the outskirts of Moscow. They are

as I left them—preserved in perfect state by that same cold which killed them. Do you not see?'

A few did already, and most had a glimmer. They looked around at the birch forest and each green bulge in the ground, seeing everything anew and replete with potential life—of a kind.

'We have with us,' the Emperor continued, his voice rising, 'the last of Europe's Revivalists: the cream of the Compeigne and Versailles factories. Elsewhere, they are all in disgrace or the grave! Now do you see?'

Now far more did. A buzz of excited chatter grew.

'They—they—the dull, the reactionary, the mundane, have driven us to the fringes of civilisation, thinking that our dreams will die here. Little do they know. Little do they know me! Reinforcements await us for the asking. Unanswerable reinforcements! We shall revive them!'

All but the hard-of-understanding now understood. They cheered. Hats took to the air.

'*Friends!*' said Napoleon. For I now call you "friends": a band of brothers! Do we seek to conquer Russia?'

They weren't sure. Some, carried away, yea'ed. The majority, unsure, hesitated.

'No, we do not,' the Emperor answered for all. 'That can come later. That is mere detail. No, the reason we have come here, together, is to claim our own, our right! Today, a new army. Tomorrow, the conquest of old Europe. And then? Who knows? But I promise you this: there will be medals—and looting! And burning cities! And willing women! There will be immortality. There will be purpose to life. There will be glory!'

He had them then—just as soon he would have many, many more. A whole dead *Grande Armée*'s worth. Wild cheering scattered wild animals in the forest for miles around.

Wearied, Napoleon slumped back onto his folding seat, but he was smiling. As was—almost—all his army.

The exceptions to that were Napoleon's children. They were glad but did not exult. It was not in their nature.

The neither living nor dead Imperial offspring looked upon the (possibly *their*) world with fresh hope. And fresh hunger.

One day all this might be theirs.

THE END

About the author

John Whitbourn has had nine novels published in the UK, USA and Russia after winning the BBC & Victor Gollancz First Fantasy Novel prize with *A Dangerous Energy* in 1991.

Most recently, his published novels include the *Downs-Lord* trilogy concerning the establishment of empire in an alternative, monster-ridden England. Whitbourn's works have received favourable reviews in *The Times*, *Telegraph*, and *Guardian*, among others. A complete collection of his acclaimed *Binscombe Tales* series is forthcoming from The Spark Furnace in autumn 2011, in both print and ebook editions.

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